WISDOM COMMENTARY

# Judges

Mercedes L. García Bachmann

Barbara E. Reid, OP, *General Editor*

VISIT…

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ISBN: 978-0-8146-8131-2

# JUDGES

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WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 7

# Judges

Mercedes L. García Bachmann

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Barbara E. Reid, OP
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A Michael Glazier Book

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: García Bachmann, Mercedes L., author.
Title: Judges / Mercedes L. García Bachmann ; Ahida Calderón Pilarski, Volume Editor ; Barbara E. Reid, OP, General Editor.
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : LITURGICAL PRESS, 2018. | Series: Wisdom commentary ; Volume 7 | "A Michael Glazier Book." | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018006633 (print) | LCCN 2017055811 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814681312 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814681060
Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Judges—Commentaries. | Bible. Judges—Feminist criticism.
Classification: LCC BS1305.53 (print) | LCC BS1305.53 .G37 2018 (ebook) | DDC 222/.3207082—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018006633

*For my mother, Ingrid Bachmann*
*and for my father, Sergio A. García Hübscher.*
*You are the best I could have hoped for*

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# *Abbreviations*

| | |
|---|---|
| AB | Anchor Bible |
| ABRL | Anchor Bible Reference Library |
| *ATJ* | *Ashland Theological Journal* |
| *BibInt* | *Biblical Interpretation* |
| BibInt | Biblical Interpretation Series |
| *Bib* | *Biblica* |
| *BSac* | *Bibliotheca Sacra* |
| *BTB* | *Biblical Theology Bulletin* |
| BZAW | Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft |
| *CBQ* | *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* |
| *CV* | *Communio Viatorum* |
| Dtr | Deuteronomistic (History; Writer); Deuteronomist |
| FCB | Feminist Companion to the Bible |
| GBS | Guides to Biblical Scholarship |
| *HTR* | *Harvard Theological Review* |
| IBC | Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching |

| | |
|---|---|
| ICC | International Critical Commentary |
| IFT | Introductions in Feminist Theology |
| ISBL | Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature |
| ITC | International Theological Commentary |
| *JANES* | *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* |
| *JBL* | *Journal of Biblical Literature* |
| *JFSR* | *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* |
| *JHS* | *Journal of Hellenistic Studies* |
| *JNES* | *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* |
| *JSOT* | *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* |
| JSOTSup | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series |
| LXX | Septuagint |
| MT | Masoretic Text |
| *NEA* | *Near Eastern Archaeology* |
| NICOT | New International Commentary on the Old Testament |
| OBO | Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis |
| OBT | Overtures to Biblical Theology |
| *OTE* | *Old Testament Essays* |
| OTL | Old Testament Library |
| PL | Patrologia Latina |
| *RIBLA* | *Revista de interpretación bíblica latino-americana* |
| SBL | Society of Biblical Literature |
| SBLDS | Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series |
| *SJOT* | *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* |
| StBibLit | Studies in Biblical Literature (Lang) |
| SymS | Symposium Series |
| TBN | Themes in Biblical Narrative |
| *VT* | *Vetus Testamentum* |
| VTSup | Supplements to Vetus Testamentum |
| WBC | Word Biblical Commentary |

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# Foreword

# *"Tell It on the Mountain"—or, "And You Shall Tell Your Daughter [as Well]"*

*Athalya Brenner-Idan*

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What can Wisdom Commentary do to help, and for whom?

The commentary genre has always been privileged in biblical studies. Traditionally acclaimed commentary series, such as the International Critical Commentary, Old Testament and New Testament Library, Hermeneia, Anchor Bible, Eerdmans, and Word—to name but several—enjoy nearly automatic prestige, and the number of women authors who participate in those is relatively small by comparison to their growing number in the scholarly guild. There certainly are some volumes written by women in them, especially in recent decades. At this time, however, this does not reflect the situation on the ground. Further, size matters. In that sense, the sheer size of the Wisdom Commentary is essential. This also represents a considerable investment and the possibility of reaching a wider audience than those already "converted."

Expecting women scholars to deal especially or only with what are considered strictly "female" matters seems unwarranted. According to Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[1] But this maxim is not relevant to our case. The point of this commentary is not to destroy but to attain greater participation in the interpretive dialogue about biblical texts. Women scholars may bring additional questions to the readerly agenda as well as fresh angles to existing issues. To assume that their questions are designed only to topple a certain male hegemony is not convincing.

At first I did ask myself: is this commentary series an addition to calm raw nerves, an embellishment to make upholding the old hierarchy palatable? Or is it indeed about becoming the Master? On second and third thoughts, however, I understood that becoming the Master is not what this is about. Knowledge is power. Since Foucault at the very least, this cannot be in dispute. Writing commentaries for biblical texts by feminist women and men for women and for men, of confessional as well as non-confessional convictions, will sabotage (hopefully) the established hierarchy but will not topple it. This is about an attempt to integrate more fully, to introduce another viewpoint, to become. What excites me about the Wisdom Commentary is that it is not offered as just an alternative supplanting or substituting for the dominant discourse.

These commentaries on biblical books will retain nonauthoritative, pluralistic viewpoints. And yes, once again, the weight of a dedicated series, to distinguish from collections of stand-alone volumes, will prove weightier.

That such an approach is especially important in the case of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is beyond doubt. Women of Judaism, Christianity, and also Islam have struggled to make it their own for centuries, even more than they have fought for the New Testament and the Qur'an. Every Hebrew Bible/Old Testament volume in this project is evidence that the day has arrived: it is now possible to read *all* the Jewish canonical books as a collection, for a collection they are, with guidance conceived of with the needs of women readers (not only men) as an integral inspiration and part thereof.

In my Jewish tradition, the main motivation for reciting the Haggadah, the ritual text recited yearly on Passover, the festival of liberation from

1. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984, 2007), 110–14. First delivered in the Second Sex Conference in New York, 1979.

bondage, is given as "And you shall tell your son" (from Exod 13:8). The knowledge and experience of past generations is thus transferred to the next, for constructing the present and the future. The ancient maxim is, literally, limited to a male audience. This series remolds the maxim into a new inclusive shape, which is of the utmost consequence: "And you shall tell your son" is extended to "And you shall tell your daughter [as well as your son]." Or, if you want, "Tell it on the mountain," for all to hear.

This is what it's all about.

# Editor's Introduction to Wisdom Commentary

## *"She Is a Breath of the Power of God" (Wis 7:25)*

*Barbara E. Reid, OP*

*General Editor*

Wisdom Commentary is the first series to offer detailed feminist interpretation of every book of the Bible. The fruit of collaborative work by an ecumenical and interreligious team of scholars, the volumes provide serious, scholarly engagement with the whole biblical text, not only those texts that explicitly mention women. The series is intended for clergy, teachers, ministers, and all serious students of the Bible. Designed to be both accessible and informed by the various approaches of biblical scholarship, it pays particular attention to the world in front of the text, that is, how the text is heard and appropriated. At the same time, this series aims to be faithful to the ancient text and its earliest audiences; thus the volumes also explicate the worlds behind the text and within it. While issues of gender are primary in this project, the volumes also address the intersecting issues of power, authority, ethnicity, race, class, and religious belief and practice. The fifty-eight volumes include the books regarded as canonical by Jews (i.e., the Tanakh); Protestants (the "Hebrew Bible" and the New Testament); and Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox

Communions (i.e., Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, including the Letter of Jeremiah, the additions to Esther, and Susanna and Bel and the Dragon in Daniel).

## A Symphony of Diverse Voices

Included in the Wisdom Commentary series are voices from scholars of many different religious traditions, of diverse ages, differing sexual identities, and varying cultural, racial, ethnic, and social contexts. Some have been pioneers in feminist biblical interpretation; others are newer contributors from a younger generation. A further distinctive feature of this series is that each volume incorporates voices other than that of the lead author(s). These voices appear alongside the commentary of the lead author(s), in the grayscale inserts. At times, a contributor may offer an alternative interpretation or a critique of the position taken by the lead author(s). At other times, she or he may offer a complementary interpretation from a different cultural context or subject position. Occasionally, portions of previously published material bring in other views. The diverse voices are not intended to be contestants in a debate or a cacophony of discordant notes. The multiple voices reflect that there is no single definitive feminist interpretation of a text. In addition, they show the importance of subject position in the process of interpretation. In this regard, the Wisdom Commentary series takes inspiration from the Talmud and from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss; New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), in which many voices, even conflicting ones, are included and not harmonized.

Contributors include biblical scholars, theologians, and readers of Scripture from outside the scholarly and religious guilds. At times, their comments pertain to a particular text. In some instances they address a theme or topic that arises from the text.

Another feature that highlights the collaborative nature of feminist biblical interpretation is that a number of the volumes have two lead authors who have worked in tandem from the inception of the project and whose voices interweave throughout the commentary.

## Woman Wisdom

The title, Wisdom Commentary, reflects both the importance to feminists of the figure of Woman Wisdom in the Scriptures and the distinct

wisdom that feminist women and men bring to the interpretive process. In the Scriptures, Woman Wisdom appears as "a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty" (Wis 7:25), who was present and active in fashioning all that exists (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 8:6). She is a spirit who pervades and penetrates all things (Wis 7:22-23), and she provides guidance and nourishment at her all-inclusive table (Prov 9:1-5). In both postexilic biblical and nonbiblical Jewish sources, Woman Wisdom is often equated with Torah, e.g., Sirach 24:23-34; Baruch 3:9–4:4; 38:2; 46:4-5; 2 Baruch 48:33, 36; 4 Ezra 5:9-10; 13:55; 14:40; 1 Enoch 42.

The New Testament frequently portrays Jesus as Wisdom incarnate. He invites his followers, "take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matt 11:29), just as Ben Sira advises, "put your neck under her [Wisdom's] yoke and let your souls receive instruction" (Sir 51:26). Just as Wisdom experiences rejection (Prov 1:23-25; Sir 15:7-8; Wis 10:3; Bar 3:12), so too does Jesus (Mark 8:31; John 1:10-11). Only some accept his invitation to his all-inclusive banquet (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; compare Prov 1:20-21; 9:3-5). Yet, "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Matt 11:19, speaking of Jesus and John the Baptist; in the Lucan parallel at 7:35 they are called "wisdom's children"). There are numerous parallels between what is said of Wisdom and of the *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18). These are only a few of many examples. This female embodiment of divine presence and power is an apt image to guide the work of this series.

## Feminism

There are many different understandings of the term "feminism." The various meanings, aims, and methods have developed exponentially in recent decades. Feminism is a perspective and a movement that springs from a recognition of inequities toward women, and it advocates for changes in whatever structures prevent full human flourishing. Three waves of feminism in the United States are commonly recognized. The first, arising in the mid-nineteenth century and lasting into the early twentieth, was sparked by women's efforts to be involved in the public sphere and to win the right to vote. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave focused on civil rights and equality for women. With the third wave, from the 1980s forward, came global feminism and the emphasis on the contextual nature of interpretation. Now a fourth wave may be emerging, with a stronger emphasis on the intersectionality of women's concerns with those of other marginalized groups and the increased use

of the internet as a platform for discussion and activism.[1] As feminism has matured, it has recognized that inequities based on gender are interwoven with power imbalances based on race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual identity, physical ability, and a host of other social markers.

## Feminist Women and Men

Men who choose to identify with and partner with feminist women in the work of deconstructing systems of domination and building structures of equality are rightly regarded as feminists. Some men readily identify with experiences of women who are discriminated against on the basis of sex/gender, having themselves had comparable experiences; others who may not have faced direct discrimination or stereotyping recognize that inequity and problematic characterization still occur, and they seek correction. This series is pleased to include feminist men both as lead authors and as contributing voices.

## Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Women interpreting the Bible from the lenses of their own experience is nothing new. Throughout the ages women have recounted the biblical stories, teaching them to their children and others, all the while interpreting them afresh for their time and circumstances.[2] Following is a very brief sketch of select foremothers who laid the groundwork for contemporary feminist biblical interpretation.

One of the earliest known Christian women who challenged patriarchal interpretations of Scripture was a consecrated virgin named Helie, who lived in the second century CE. When she refused to marry, her

1. See Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism" (October 25, 2015), at http://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism; and Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave.

2. For fuller treatments of this history, see chap. 7, "One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism," in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Susanne Scholz, "From the 'Woman's Bible' to the 'Women's Bible,' The History of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible," in *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible*, IFT 13 (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 12–32; Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*: *A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

parents brought her before a judge, who quoted to her Paul's admonition, "It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:9). In response, Helie first acknowledges that this is what Scripture says, but then she retorts, "but not for everyone, that is, not for holy virgins."[3] She is one of the first to question the notion that a text has one meaning that is applicable in all situations.

A Jewish woman who also lived in the second century CE, Beruriah, is said to have had "profound knowledge of biblical exegesis and outstanding intelligence."[4] One story preserved in the Talmud (b. Berakot 10a) tells of how she challenged her husband, Rabbi Meir, when he prayed for the destruction of a sinner. Proffering an alternate interpretation, she argued that Psalm 104:35 advocated praying for the destruction of sin, not the sinner.

In medieval times the first written commentaries on Scripture from a critical feminist point of view emerge. While others may have been produced and passed on orally, they are for the most part lost to us now. Among the earliest preserved feminist writings are those of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), German writer, mystic, and abbess of a Benedictine monastery. She reinterpreted the Genesis narratives in a way that presented women and men as complementary and interdependent. She frequently wrote about feminine aspects of the Divine.[5] Along with other women mystics of the time, such as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416), she spoke authoritatively from her personal experiences of God's revelation in prayer.

In this era, women were also among the scribes who copied biblical manuscripts. Notable among them is Paula Dei Mansi of Verona, from a distinguished family of Jewish scribes. In 1288, she translated from Hebrew into Italian a collection of Bible commentaries written by her father and added her own explanations.[6]

Another pioneer, Christine de Pizan (1365–ca. 1430), was a French court writer and prolific poet. She used allegory and common sense

3. Madrid, Escorial MS, a II 9, f. 90 v., as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 140.

4. See Judith R. Baskin, "Women and Post-Biblical Commentary," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Women of Reform Judaism, Federation of Temple Sisterhood, 2008), xlix–lv, at lii.

5. Hildegard of Bingen, *De Operatione Dei*, 1.4.100; PL 197:885bc, as cited in Lerner, *Feminist Consciousness*, 142–43. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

6. Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, Cheryl Tallan, eds., *JPS Guide to Jewish Women 600 B.C.E.–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2003), 110–11.

to subvert misogynist readings of Scripture and celebrated the accomplishments of female biblical figures to argue for women's active roles in building society.[7]

By the seventeenth century, there were women who asserted that the biblical text needs to be understood and interpreted in its historical context. For example, Rachel Speght (1597–ca. 1630), a Calvinist English poet, elaborates on the historical situation in first-century Corinth that prompted Paul to say, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). Her aim was to show that the biblical texts should not be applied in a literal fashion to all times and circumstances. Similarly, Margaret Fell (1614–1702), one of the founders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, addressed the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking in church by insisting that they do not have universal validity. Rather, they need to be understood in their historical context, as addressed to a local church in particular time-bound circumstances.[8]

Along with analyzing the historical context of the biblical writings, women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began to attend to misogynistic interpretations based on faulty translations. One of the first to do so was British feminist Mary Astell (1666–1731).[9] In the United States, the Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), Quaker women from a slaveholding family in South Carolina, learned biblical Greek and Hebrew so that they could interpret the Bible for themselves. They were prompted to do so after men sought to silence them from speaking out against slavery and for women's rights by claiming that the Bible (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34) prevented women from speaking in public.[10] Another prominent abolitionist, Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), a former slave, quoted the Bible liberally in her speeches[11] and in so doing challenged cultural assumptions and biblical interpretations that undergird gender inequities.

7. See further Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 127–32.

8. Her major work, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures*, published in London in 1667, gave a systematic feminist reading of all biblical texts pertaining to women.

9. Mary Astell, *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970, reprint of the 1730 edition; earliest edition of this work is 1700), 103–4.

10. See further Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838).

11. See, for example, her most famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, OH; http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp.

Another monumental work that emerged in nineteenth-century England was that of Jewish theologian Grace Aguilar (1816–1847), *The Women of Israel*,[12] published in 1845. Aguilar's approach was to make connections between the biblical women and contemporary Jewish women's concerns. She aimed to counter the widespread notion that women were degraded in Jewish law and that only in Christianity were women's dignity and value upheld. Her intent was to help Jewish women find strength and encouragement by seeing the evidence of God's compassionate love in the history of every woman in the Bible. While not a full commentary on the Bible, Aguilar's work stands out for its comprehensive treatment of every female biblical character, including even the most obscure references.[13]

The first person to produce a full-blown feminist commentary on the Bible was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902). A leading proponent in the United States for women's right to vote, she found that whenever women tried to make inroads into politics, education, or the work world, the Bible was quoted against them. Along with a team of like-minded women, she produced her own commentary on every text of the Bible that concerned women. Her pioneering two-volume project, *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895 and 1898, urges women to recognize that texts that degrade women come from the men who wrote the texts, not from God, and to use their common sense to rethink what has been presented to them as sacred.

Nearly a century later, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), appeared. This one-volume commentary features North American feminist scholarship on each book of the Protestant canon. Like Cady Stanton's commentary, it does not contain comments on every section of the biblical text but only on those passages deemed relevant to women. It was revised and expanded in 1998 to include the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books, and the contributors to this new volume reflect the global face of contemporary feminist scholarship. The revisions made in the third edition, which appeared in 2012, represent the profound advances in feminist biblical scholarship and include newer voices. In both the second and third editions, *The* has been dropped from the title.

12. The full title is *The Women of Israel or Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures and Jewish History Illustrative of the Past History, Present Duty, and Future Destiny of the Hebrew Females, as Based on the Word of God.*

13. See further Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, xxxviii; Taylor and Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 31–37.

Also appearing at the centennial of Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* were two volumes edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews. The first, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), charts a comprehensive approach to feminist interpretation from ecumenical, interreligious, and multicultural perspectives. The second volume, published in 1994, provides critical feminist commentary on each book of the New Testament as well as on three books of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and eleven other early Christian writings.

In Europe, similar endeavors have been undertaken, such as the one-volume *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), featuring German feminist biblical interpretation of each book of the Bible, along with apocryphal books, and several extrabiblical writings. This work, now in its third edition, has recently been translated into English.[14] A multivolume project, *The Bible and Women: An Encylopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, edited by Irmtraud Fischer, Adriana Valerio, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Christiana de Groot, is currently in production. This project presents a history of the reception of the Bible as embedded in Western cultural history and focuses particularly on gender-relevant biblical themes, biblical female characters, and women recipients of the Bible. The volumes are published in English, Spanish, Italian, and German.[15]

Another groundbreaking work is the collection The Feminist Companion to the Bible Series, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993–2015), which comprises twenty volumes of commen-

14. *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Everett R. Kalin, Nancy Lukens, Linda M. Maloney, Barbara Rumscheidt, Martin Rumscheidt, and Tina Steiner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). Another notable collection is the three volumes edited by Susanne Scholz, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, Recent Research in Biblical Studies 7, 8, 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013, 2014, 2016).

15. The first volume, on the Torah, appeared in Spanish in 2009, in German and Italian in 2010, and in English in 2011 (Atlanta: SBL Press). Five more volumes are now available: *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2014); *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Nuria Calduch-Benages (2014); *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Perroni; English translation ed. Amy-Jill Levine (2015); *The High Middle Ages*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio (2015); and *Early Jewish Writings*, ed. Eileen Schuller and Marie-Theres Wacker (2017). For further information, see http://www.bibleandwomen.org.

taries on the Old Testament. The parallel series, Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff and Maria Mayo Robbins (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001–2009), contains thirteen volumes with one more planned. These two series are not full commentaries on the biblical books but comprise collected essays on discrete biblical texts.

Works by individual feminist biblical scholars in all parts of the world abound, and they are now too numerous to list in this introduction. Feminist biblical interpretation has reached a level of maturity that now makes possible a commentary series on every book of the Bible. In recent decades, women have had greater access to formal theological education, have been able to learn critical analytical tools, have put their own interpretations into writing, and have developed new methods of biblical interpretation. Until recent decades the work of feminist biblical interpreters was largely unknown, both to other women and to their brothers in the synagogue, church, and academy. Feminists now have taken their place in the professional world of biblical scholars, where they build on the work of their foremothers and connect with one another across the globe in ways not previously possible. In a few short decades, feminist biblical criticism has become an integral part of the academy.

## Methodologies

Feminist biblical scholars use a variety of methods and often employ a number of them together.[16] In the Wisdom Commentary series, the authors will explain their understanding of feminism and the feminist reading strategies used in their commentary. Each volume treats the biblical text in blocks of material, not an analysis verse by verse. The entire text is considered, not only those passages that feature female characters or that speak specifically about women. When women are not apparent in the narrative, feminist lenses are used to analyze the dynamics in the text between male characters, the models of power, binary ways of thinking, and the dynamics of imperialism. Attention is given to how the whole text functions and how it was and is heard, both in its original context and today. Issues of particular concern to women—e.g., poverty, food, health, the environment, water—come to the fore.

16. See the seventeen essays in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), which show the complementarity of various approaches.

One of the approaches used by early feminists and still popular today is to lift up the overlooked and forgotten stories of women in the Bible. Studies of women in each of the Testaments have been done, and there are also studies on women in particular biblical books.[17] Feminists recognize that the examples of biblical characters can be both empowering and problematic. The point of the feminist enterprise is not to serve as an apologetic for women; it is rather, in part, to recover women's history and literary roles in all their complexity and to learn from that recovery.

Retrieving the submerged history of biblical women is a crucial step for constructing the story of the past so as to lead to liberative possibilities for the present and future. There are, however, some pitfalls to this approach. Sometimes depictions of biblical women have been naïve and romantic. Some commentators exalt the virtues of both biblical and contemporary women and paint women as superior to men. Such reverse discrimination inhibits movement toward equality for all. In addition, some feminists challenge the idea that one can "pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve."[18] Still other feminists find these images to have enormous value.

One other danger with seeking the submerged history of women is the tendency for Christian feminists to paint Jesus and even Paul as liberators of women in a way that demonizes Judaism.[19] Wisdom Commentary aims to enhance understanding of Jesus as well as Paul as Jews of their day and to forge solidarity among Jewish and Christian feminists.

17. See, e.g., Alice Bach, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, *Women in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003); Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001); Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, Companions to the New Testament (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

18. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts about Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, FCB 6, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 75–97, at 76.

19. See Judith Plaskow, "Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1:117–29; Amy-Jill Levine, "The New Testament and Anti-Judaism," in *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 87–117.

Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text. Feminist biblical scholars aim not only to deconstruct but also to reclaim and reconstruct biblical history as women's history, in which women were central and active agents in creating religious heritage.[20] A further step is to construct meaning for contemporary women and men in a liberative movement toward transformation of social, political, economic, and religious structures.[21] In recent years, some feminists have embraced new historicism, which accents the creative role of the interpreter in any construction of history and exposes the power struggles to which the text witnesses.[22]

Literary critics analyze the world of the text: its form, language patterns, and rhetorical function.[23] They do not attempt to separate layers of tradition and redaction but focus on the text holistically, as it is in

20. See, for example, Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

21. See, e.g., Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), whose aim is to engage in biblical interpretation not only for intellectual enlightenment but, even more important, for personal and communal transformation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (*Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001]) envisions the work of feminist biblical interpretation as a dance of Wisdom that consists of seven steps that interweave in spiral movements toward liberation, the final one being transformative action for change.

22. See Gina Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism*, GBS, Old Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

23. Phyllis Trible was among the first to employ this method with texts from Genesis and Ruth in her groundbreaking book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Another pioneer in feminist literary criticism is Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]). For surveys of recent developments in literary methods, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

its present form. They examine how meaning is created in the interaction between the text and its reader in multiple contexts. Within the arena of literary approaches are reader-oriented approaches, narrative, rhetorical, structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, ideological, autobiographical, and performance criticism.[24] Narrative critics study the interrelation among author, text, and audience through investigation of settings, both spatial and temporal; characters; plot; and narrative techniques (e.g., irony, parody, intertextual allusions). Reader-response critics attend to the impact that the text has on the reader or hearer. They recognize that when a text is detrimental toward women there is the choice either to affirm the text or to read against the grain toward a liberative end. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the style of argumentation and attends to how the author is attempting to shape the thinking or actions of the hearer. Structuralist critics analyze the complex patterns of binary oppositions in the text to derive its meaning.[25] Post-structuralist approaches challenge the notion that there are fixed meanings to any biblical text or that there is one universal truth. They engage in close readings of the text and often engage in intertextual analysis.[26] Within this approach is deconstructionist criticism, which views the text as a site of conflict, with competing narratives. The interpreter aims to expose the fault lines and overturn and reconfigure binaries by elevating the underling of a pair and foregrounding it.[27] Feminists also use other postmodern approaches, such as ideological and autobiographical criticism. The former analyzes the system of ideas that underlies the power and

24. See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, eds., *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

25. See, e.g., David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Three Structural Analyses in the Old Testament*, JSOTSup 7 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978).

26. See, e.g., Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2010); Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

27. David Penchansky, "Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–205. See, for example, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); David Rutledge, *Reading Marginally: Feminism, Deconstruction and the Bible*, BibInt 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

values concealed in the text as well as that of the interpreter.[28] The latter involves deliberate self-disclosure while reading the text as a critical exegete.[29] Performance criticism attends to how the text was passed on orally, usually in communal settings, and to the verbal and nonverbal interactions between the performer and the audience.[30]

From the beginning, feminists have understood that interpreting the Bible is an act of power. In recent decades, feminist biblical scholars have developed hermeneutical theories of the ethics and politics of biblical interpretation to challenge the claims to value neutrality of most academic biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholars have also turned their attention to how some biblical writings were shaped by the power of empire and how this still shapes readers' self-understandings today. They have developed hermeneutical approaches that reveal, critique, and evaluate the interactions depicted in the text against the context of empire, and they consider implications for contemporary contexts.[31] Feminists also analyze the dynamics of colonization and the mentalities of colonized peoples in the exercise of biblical interpretation. As Kwok Pui-lan explains, "A postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where these elites could exercise control."[32] Methods and models from sociology and cultural anthropology are used by feminists to investigate

28. See Tina Pippin, ed., *Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts: Semeia* 59 (1992); Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007).

29. See, e.g., Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Interpretation: Between Text and Self* (Leiden: Deo, 2002); P. J. W. Schutte, "When *They*, *We*, and the Passive Become *I*—Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 61 (2005): 401–16.

30. See, e.g., Holly Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009).

31. E.g., Gale Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Warren Carter, *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004).

32. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9. See also, Musa W. Dube, ed., *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); Cristl M. Maier and Carolyn J. Sharp,

women's everyday lives, their experiences of marriage, childrearing, labor, money, illness, etc.[33]

As feminists have examined the construction of gender from varying cultural perspectives, they have become ever more cognizant that the way gender roles are defined within differing cultures varies radically. As Mary Ann Tolbert observes, "Attempts to isolate some universal role that cross-culturally defines 'woman' have run into contradictory evidence at every turn."[34] Some women have coined new terms to highlight the particularities of their socio-cultural context. Many African American feminists, for example, call themselves *womanists* to draw attention to the double oppression of racism and sexism they experience.[35] Similarly, many US Hispanic feminists speak of themselves as *mujeristas* (*mujer* is Spanish for "woman").[36] Others prefer to be called "Latina feminists."[37] Both groups emphasize that the context for their theologizing is *mestizaje* and *mulatez* (racial and cultural mixture), done *en conjunto* (in community), with *lo cotidiano* (everyday lived experience) of Hispanic women as starting points for theological reflection and the encounter with the divine. Intercultural analysis has become an indispensable tool for working toward justice for women at the global level.[38]

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*Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

33. See, for example, Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Luise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Susan Niditch, *"My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

34. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Social, Sociological, and Anthropological Methods," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:255–71, at 265.

35. Alice Walker coined the term (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967, 1983]). See also Katie G. Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 30–40; Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988); Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

36. Ada María Isasi-Díaz (*Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996]) is credited with coining the term.

37. E.g., María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodríguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

38. See, e.g., María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World*, Studies in Latino/a Catholicism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

Some feminists are among those who have developed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) interpretation. This approach focuses on issues of sexual identity and uses various reading strategies. Some point out the ways in which categories that emerged in recent centuries are applied anachronistically to biblical texts to make modern-day judgments. Others show how the Bible is silent on contemporary issues about sexual identity. Still others examine same-sex relationships in the Bible by figures such as Ruth and Naomi or David and Jonathan. In recent years, queer theory has emerged; it emphasizes the blurriness of boundaries not just of sexual identity but also of gender roles. Queer critics often focus on texts in which figures transgress what is traditionally considered proper gender behavior.[39]

Feminists also recognize that the struggle for women's equality and dignity is intimately connected with the struggle for respect for Earth and for the whole of the cosmos. Ecofeminists interpret Scripture in ways that highlight the link between human domination of nature and male subjugation of women. They show how anthropocentric ways of interpreting the Bible have overlooked or dismissed Earth and Earth community. They invite readers to identify not only with human characters in the biblical narrative but also with other Earth creatures and domains of nature, especially those that are the object of injustice. Some use creative imagination to retrieve the interests of Earth implicit in the narrative and enable Earth to speak.[40]

## Biblical Authority

By the late nineteenth century, some feminists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, began to question openly whether the Bible could continue to be regarded as authoritative for women. They viewed the Bible itself as the source of women's oppression, and some rejected its sacred origin

39. See, e.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Women Partners in the New Testament," *JFSR* 6 (1990): 65–86; Deirdre J. Good, "Reading Strategies for Biblical Passages on Same-Sex Relations," *Theology and Sexuality* 7 (1997): 70–82; Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Feminist Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, 2011); Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone, eds., *Bible Trouble: Queer Readings at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011).

40. E.g., Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, SymS 46 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2008); Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America*, Women from the Margins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

and saving claims. Some decided that the Bible and the religious traditions that enshrine it are too thoroughly saturated with androcentrism and patriarchy to be redeemable.[41]

In the Wisdom Commentary series, questions such as these may be raised, but the aim of this series is not to lead readers to reject the authority of the biblical text. Rather, the aim is to promote better understanding of the contexts from which the text arose and of the rhetorical effects it has on women and men in contemporary contexts. Such understanding can lead to a deepening of faith, with the Bible serving as an aid to bring flourishing of life.

## Language for God

Because of the ways in which the term "God" has been used to symbolize the divine in predominantly male, patriarchal, and monarchical modes, feminists have designed new ways of speaking of the divine. Some have called attention to the inadequacy of the term *God* by trying to visually destabilize our ways of thinking and speaking of the divine. Rosemary Radford Ruether proposed *God/ess*, as an unpronounceable term pointing to the unnameable understanding of the divine that transcends patriarchal limitations.[42] Some have followed traditional Jewish practice, writing *G-d.* Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has adopted *G*d*.[43] Others draw on the biblical tradition to mine female and non-gender-specific metaphors and symbols.[44] In Wisdom Commentary, there is not one standard way of expressing the divine; each author will use her or his preferred ways. The one exception is that when the tetragrammaton, YHWH, the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, is used, it will be without vowels, respecting the Jewish custom of avoiding pronouncing the divine name out of reverence.

41. E.g., Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: A Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

42. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

43. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 191 n. 3.

44. E.g., Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). See further Elizabeth A. Johnson, "God," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 128–30.

## Nomenclature for the Two Testaments

In recent decades, some biblical scholars have begun to call the two Testaments of the Bible by names other than the traditional nomenclature: Old and New Testament. Some regard "Old" as derogatory, implying that it is no longer relevant or that it has been superseded. Consequently, terms like Hebrew Bible, First Testament, and Jewish Scriptures and, correspondingly, Christian Scriptures or Second Testament have come into use. There are a number of difficulties with these designations. The term "Hebrew Bible" does not take into account that parts of the Old Testament are written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic.[45] Moreover, for Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers, the Old Testament includes books written in Greek—the Deuterocanonical books, considered Apocrypha by Protestants.[46] The term "Jewish Scriptures" is inadequate because these books are also sacred to Christians. Conversely, "Christian Scriptures" is not an accurate designation for the New Testament, since the Old Testament is also part of the Christian Scriptures. Using "First and Second Testament" also has difficulties, in that it can imply a hierarchy and a value judgment.[47] Jews generally use the term Tanakh, an acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

In Wisdom Commentary, if authors choose to use a designation other than Tanakh, Old Testament, and New Testament, they will explain how they mean the term.

## Translation

Modern feminist scholars recognize the complexities connected with biblical translation, as they have delved into questions about philosophy of language, how meanings are produced, and how they are culturally situated. Today it is evident that simply translating into gender-neutral formulations cannot address all the challenges presented by androcentric texts. Efforts at feminist translation must also deal with issues around authority and canonicity.[48]

45. Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12-26; Dan 2:4–7:28.

46. Representing the *via media* between Catholic and reformed, Anglicans generally consider the Apocrypha to be profitable, if not canonical, and utilize select Wisdom texts liturgically.

47. See Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 193–99.

48. Elizabeth Castelli, "*Les Belles Infidèles*/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, 1:189–204, here 190.

Because of these complexities, the editors of Wisdom Commentary series have chosen to use an existing translation, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is provided for easy reference at the top of each page of commentary. The NRSV was produced by a team of ecumenical and interreligious scholars, is a fairly literal translation, and uses inclusive language for human beings. Brief discussions about problematic translations appear in the inserts labeled "Translation Matters." When more detailed discussions are available, these will be indicated in footnotes. In the commentary, wherever Hebrew or Greek words are used, English translation is provided. In cases where a wordplay is involved, transliteration is provided to enable understanding.

## Art and Poetry

Artistic expression in poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and various other modes is very important to feminist interpretation. Where possible, art and poetry are included in the print volumes of the series. In a number of instances, these are original works created for this project. Regrettably, copyright and production costs prohibit the inclusion of color photographs and other artistic work. It is our hope that the web version will allow a greater collection of such resources.

## Glossary

Because there are a number of excellent readily available resources that provide definitions and concise explanations of terms used in feminist theological and biblical studies, this series will not include a glossary. We refer you to works such as *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty M. Russell with J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and volume 1 of *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Individual authors in the Wisdom Commentary series will define the way they are using terms that may be unfamiliar.

## Bibliography

Because bibliographies are quickly outdated and because the space is limited, only a list of Works Cited is included in the print volumes. A comprehensive bibliography for each volume is posted on a dedicated website and is updated regularly. The link for this volume can be found at wisdomcommentary.org.

## A Concluding Word

In just a few short decades, feminist biblical studies has grown exponentially, both in the methods that have been developed and in the number of scholars who have embraced it. We realize that this series is limited and will soon need to be revised and updated. It is our hope that Wisdom Commentary, by making the best of current feminist biblical scholarship available in an accessible format to ministers, preachers, teachers, scholars, and students, will aid all readers in their advancement toward God's vision of dignity, equality, and justice for all.

## Acknowledgments

There are a great many people who have made this series possible: first, Peter Dwyer, director of Liturgical Press, and Hans Christoffersen, publisher of the academic market at Liturgical Press, who have believed in this project and have shepherded it since it was conceived in 2008. Editorial consultants Athalya Brenner-Idan and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have not only been an inspiration with their pioneering work but have encouraged us all along the way with their personal involvement. Volume editors Mary Ann Beavis, Carol J. Dempsey, Amy-Jill Levine, Linda M. Maloney, Ahida Pilarski, Sarah Tanzer, Lauress Wilkins Lawrence, and Seung Ai Yang have lent their extraordinary wisdom to the shaping of the series, have used their extensive networks of relationships to secure authors and contributors, and have worked tirelessly to guide their work to completion. Two others who contributed greatly to the shaping of the project at the outset were Linda M. Day and Mignon Jacobs, as well as Barbara E. Bowe of blessed memory (d. 2010). Editorial and research assistant Susan M. Hickman has provided invaluable support with administrative details and arrangements. I am grateful to Brian Eisenschenk and Christine Henderson who have assisted Susan Hickman with the Wiki. I am especially thankful to Lauren L. Murphy and Justin Howell for their work in copyediting; and to Colleen Stiller, production manager, Stephanie Nix, production assistant, and Tara Durheim, associate publisher.

# *Author's Introduction*

## Getting to Know Each Other

Judges is largely written in narrative style. Most of its twenty-one chapters alternate the typical narrative verbal forms with direct speech in the form of short dialogues or reports of inner thoughts. Among its literary genres are an epic poem (Deborah's song, 5:1-31), an allegory (9:8-15), diverse oaths (1:12; 11:30-31; 21:1), a few riddles (15:12-13, 18), and a few prayers (6:22-23; 13:8; 15:18). Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher has calculated a ratio of 39.6 percent dialogue to 60.4 percent narrative.[1] It is a well-crafted work, inviting reflection, at times causing joy, and at other times, nausea. The book has stories of diverse length about twelve leaders (said either to deliver or to judge Israel) and some kings. It also includes various encounters with a divine messenger and several stories in which there are no more deliverers.

Scholars have not dealt evenly with all of these chapters, as is evident from the bibliography. This commentary therefore attempts to give special attention to those texts on which there is little feminist literature

1. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzählte Welten im Richterbuch*, BibInt 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 23, chart, and n. 101. Only 3:7-11; 10:1-5; and 12:8-15 lack any direct speech; in the other sections it is unevenly distributed. Even though it is a composite work, it has been carefully drafted, for one detects no sudden changes from one style to the other, even in those sections usually called "Introduction" and "Appendix" that are later accretions.

available, assuming that readers might have access to other works on the feminist classics, such as Samson and Delilah, Deborah and Jael, and Jephthah and his daughter. It also considers the larger picture of the book rather than the pericope or the story by itself and sets a mirror in front of our cruel world—a mirror that tells us that the violence and prejudices found in Judges are by no means over.

## Why Not Seek for the Author of Judges

Like most, if not all, biblical books, Judges is a collective product. No single author can be identified, although many attempts are recorded in the history of interpretation of the book. In the last century, new attempts appeared, not in relation to particular names, but to the possibility that some biblical books may be the product of female authors. And although attractive, this theory also has weak flanks, for many women are patriarchal and some men are attuned to women's struggles for equality. In order to solve this dilemma, Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes have proposed searching for male or female voices, not authors, within a text.

> When looking for women's texts, one has to refer to two preliminary questions.
>
> (a) Is it possible to gender a text or its author, that is, to define one or the other, or both, as a product of women's culture or men's culture? This, of course, is mainly a question of the adequacy of the methodology or methodologies employed.
>
> (b) Is the gendering of texts important, and for whom? This is a question of validity and the contribution to literary and cultural knowledge that gendering texts might advance.
>
> We start from a conviction that women composed literature in biblical times, a facility not rendered impossible by illiteracy. . . . We have begun (contra positions adopted earlier) to find it more interesting to abandon acts of gendering texts by referring to the gender of their (conjectured) authors. Instead, in order to define a text as a women's text (or a men's text), we try to discern female (and later male) voices in them.[2]

In this way, a certain character in the story may voice a male fantasy about women or the story may reflect female concerns or experiences; it

2. Athalya Brenner, "Introduction," in Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*, BibInt 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 6.

may be advancing a liberating agenda or strengthening the patriarchal grip on women. Of course, much depends on the interpreter's view on a certain statement, as scholarship on the dialogue between Jephthah's daughter and her father, for instance, makes clear. (Is she ironic? Does she obediently comply? Who blames whom?) At any rate, van Dijk-Hemmes and Brenner's proposal has achieved a certain level of acceptance, at least among feminist scholars.[3]

A second strand of research has been that of humor and irony, which, like the authorial pen, is notoriously difficult to prove, particularly outside one's own culture. Both issues are independent from and related to each other. Humor may be an expression of gender or, to put it differently, it may be used and is still used differently by men and by women (as well as by different subcultures) for many purposes. Humor can be used to cope with anger, sadness, and despair. In this sense, several scholars have rightly seen female voices in large portions of the book.[4] Besides holding up a mirror for women (that there could have been female authors of the Bible), one other very important hermeneutical consequence is that it opens up a different perspective. Judges may still be a chauvinistic contest between warriors, but such is no longer the accepted attitude toward Israel's origins but is rather condemned by irenic women—or irenic men.

Recently, Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher has explored how the several "worlds" of the different characters in Judges, as well as of their readers, subtly or overtly compete with each other.[5] Such a reading allows for the possibility of thinking that no single thread can be easily identified and that not even the narrator has the only authoritative saying. The end result is a careful composition in which different voices talk to each other, together creating a symphony, whose message is other than that of its individual voices. Needless to say, this approach is interested not in the author/s of the book but, on the contrary, in the lack of anything unifying like "the message of the book."

3. With regard to Judges, see particularly Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Traces of Women's Texts in the Hebrew Bible," in Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts*, 32–38.

4. See Adrien Janis Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men Who Play God?," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 34–54, who argues for a female author of Judges. We should also recognize that many men do not enjoy the exploits that Judges exposes.

5. See note 1 above; also Philippe Guillaume's review of Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzählte Welten im Richterbuch*, *JHS* 13 (2013), http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/jhs/article/view/20715/15810.

Neither authorship nor place of origin is currently hotly disputed, unless they come into the broader debate on the date of composition. Martin Noth's theory of a Deuteronomistic History (Joshua–Kings), also referred to as the Dtr,[6] has been modified so much that, as a Gruyere cheese with large holes behind its rind, one is never sure how much "stuff" remains there. In general terms, one may say that most scholars believe there might have been independent premonarchic stories about saviors (for instance, the Deborah-Jael-Barak saga and Jotham's fable), put together in the late monarchic period and later edited. Opinions differ vastly as to what "later edited" means. Robert O'Connell, for instance, believes that the book shows signs of editorial work in favor of promoting a Judahite king. To him, this is especially evident in the double dénouement of chapters 17–21 but also in other rhetorical facts, such as Benjamin being cast in such a negative light, as a foil to Judah's positive portrayal. Accordingly, he dates the book to the time when Saul and David were struggling with each other to hold kingship over the twelve tribes. Second Samuel 1–4 would be the story to look at in order to understand the preoccupations presented in Judges.[7]

Elie Assis arrives at approximately the same time span via another route, by looking only at the stories of Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah. He thinks the main concern of the book is the question about Israel's different kinds of leadership; these stories, central to the book, present judges who are faced with the option of seeking their people's or their own interest. The issue, then, is not whether to have elders, judges, or kings but whether to have leaders who act for the sake of God and God's people or for their own benefit. Leaders who go to war only to acquire greater glory are not good leaders. Leaders who accept kingship for their own personal benefit are, likewise, not good for Israel (or anyone, may we add). Since, according to this scholar, the question about different types of leadership can still be asked as the book was produced, at least these three central stories must stem from a premonarchic time:

6. Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); Steve L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham, eds., *The History of Israel's Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, JSOTSup 182 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994); Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2005).

7. Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 305–42; also 71–72, where he studies connections of Judg 2:1-5 to Josh 23–24; Deut 7; and Deut 31.

"A discussion of the advantages and disadvantages reflects a reality in which the monarchy did not exist, and the aim of the writer is to set out considerations for and against."[8]

Finally, several scholars (including myself) prefer a postexilic date for the final edition of the book, when "there was no king in Israel," but the earlier experience of kings had left a pessimistic imprint on the sages and priests.[9] Mercedes Navarro Puerto, to take one example, notes an exilic, Deuteronomistic (Dtr) narrative in which there is still hope for a monarchic attempt after the model of David's kingship ("in those days there was no king in Israel");[10] however, the way in which these loose stories have been edited into the whole of the book shows the postexilic leaders' disappointment with the monarchic experiment that led to the exile. Not only disappointment, but she argues that they betray also their concern for a fragile social and religious community, evident in the way they treat their own women.[11]

## Structure of the Book

At present there is no agreement as to the book's overall structure. And since a work of art is more satisfying when it can be apprehended in its wholeness, as a total message, scholars keep seeking for one structure. Starting from the general agreement into more debated structures, the following may be said. First, there is a three-part organization of the materials:

8. Elie Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal Interest: An Ideology of Leadership in the Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah Narratives (Judg. 6–12)*, VTSup 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 246; see also 239–48.

9. See Barry Webb's discussion, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 15–32; Roger Ryan, *Judges*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), xi, devotes to his heading "When Was Judges Written?" only one sentence: "Probably in the sixth century BCE."

10. Mercedes Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio: In-conclusiones en el libro de los Jueces* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2013), 139, basing her approach on Corinne Lanoir, *Femmes fatales, femmes rebelles. Figures féminines dans le libre des Juges* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2005). She understands the women in Judges, particularly Jephthah's daughter and the women in chapters 19–21, as women in a transition or frontier period, in which the community is itself very unstable.

11. See Webb, *Judges*, 10–32; Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 1–18; and Serge Frolov, "Rethinking Judges," *CBQ* 71 (2009): 24–27, all with abundant bibliography.

- an introduction (1:1–3:6)[12]
- a series of stories about "judges" (3:7–16:31)
- a conclusion (17:1–21:25)

This deliberately vague structure reflects what has achieved consensus among scholars. Most commentators understand there is a double introduction and a double conclusion, and the central section may be further divided. How this central section is organized is, precisely, the bone of contention among scholars.

A traditional view shows the judges as deliverers who are raised up by YHWH when the people cry out because of the oppression suffered by an external enemy (Canaanites, Philistines, Midianites, and others). The judge saves the people and rules for a period of time, during which the people are faithful to YHWH. As the judge dies, a new cycle begins: idolatry, injustice, external oppression, crying out to YHWH, a deliverer is raised up, and so forth. This cycle starts with Othniel's rule, the first of Israel's judges and one of the few ideal ones (Judg 3:7-11), and it seems to have set a model for the rest of the book and for later scholarship as well. The main problem with this structure is that there are several stories that cannot be fitted into the cycle. Furthermore, and worse, oppression and slaughter are suffered also from their own people; so, it is debatable whether or not the general scheme of deliverance from external enemies can be applied to all the stories. Rather than seeing these (and other) inconsistencies as signs of a faulty redaction, J. Cheryl Exum has demonstrated that they are "a sign of further dissolution. The political and moral instability depicted in Judges is reflected in the textual instability. The framework deconstructs itself, so to speak, and the cycle of apostasy and deliverance becomes increasingly murky."[13] In other words, the authors convey their message through both content and container, perhaps reproducing their own sense of social instability.

K. Lawson Younger also finds a double chiasm between both introductions and conclusions with the themes of wars of subjugation and utter destruction at the beginning and end of the book (1:1-2:5 and chaps. 19–21)

12. My preference is for the term "exposition," from Yairah Amit, *The Book of the Judges: The Art of Editing*, BibInt 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 120–22, but I have kept "introduction" because it is the term commonly used.

13. J. Cheryl Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 410–29, here 412.

and difficulties with religious idols (2:6–3:6 and 17–18).[14] These combined elements point to the worsening of the situation, since the foreign enemies of chapter 1 become the Israelites themselves in the last chapters; they kill each other, steal from each other their gods, install priests by themselves, and abduct women to replenish a tribe put on the brink of extinction—everything with little or no consultation with YHWH.

Assis believes there are two main themes in Judges.[15] The first judges are positive leaders who address the people's religious drive to idolatry. With the ambivalent figure of Gideon, right at the center of the seven main judges (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson), the issues both of idolatry and of leadership are addressed. And after Gideon, the last three stories (and the conclusion) have to do with dubious if not outright wicked leadership by Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson. There is much for which to commend Assis, since those issues are certainly important for any people. Not every scholar, however, would agree on such a negative view of Jephthah or Samson—starting with Hebrews 11:32.

O'Connell's analysis is too complex to be reproduced here; suffice it to mention the "south-to-north tribal-political schema of Prologue-A (1:1–2:5)," the "twelve-part religious-historical cycle, introduced in Prologue-B (2:6–3:6)," the use of "plot-structure and characterization . . . to form the basis for observations about rhetorical concerns in the deliverer accounts," and, finally, "the accounts of the double dénouement," taking up themes and issues developed throughout the narrative.[16]

Another important element of coherence is the place for women. The book starts with the story of a daughter, Achsah, and it ends with the story of another daughter, the one married to the Levite, who is abused, raped, murdered, and dismembered (in fact, it ends with several daughters abused by their compulsory marriage to Benjaminites). Most of them are nameless, fulfill traditional roles, are alien to some degree; very few are positively described; and all of them "are involved in events

14. K. Lawson Younger, "Judges 1 in Its Near Eastern Literary Context," in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, James Hofmeier, and David W. Baker (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 224. Younger quotes Exum and also notes that Esarhaddon's Babylonian inscriptions and other ancient Near Eastern writings include a double introduction and cyclic patterns (n. 49).

15. Assis, *Self-Interest*, 127–30.

16. O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 343.

presented as of intertribal or national import."[17] By the middle of the book another daughter is offered by her father as a war vow, giving "the first hint that lack of control over heads of families is a crucial flaw that will ultimately lead to the destruction of the social order."[18] While these stories are dissimilar in several aspects, they contribute an important element to the general reflection on leadership and on society at large. In reference to the Levite's abuse of his *pîlegeš*-wife, Jacqueline Lapsley throws light on the subtle ways the narrators have for making their audience ponder hard ethical issues. We find her path very useful, as it points to the ethical decisions involved, yet not through ready recipes but through careful pondering by the audience:

> The biblical texts are often criticized for depicting women as silent or helpless victims with no voice. There is some truth in these critiques, but here something else is going on. The narrator is subtly guiding the reader to evaluate the behavior of the Levite in a critical light. But why such subtlety? Why does the narrator not bluntly say that the behavior of the Levite was thoughtless, or even wicked? Because the power of the story lies not in the hard ethical answers it offers, but in its capacity to provoke the moral imagination of its readers. The narrator's account stirs the reader not to quick and easy judgment, but to ponder the complexities of human motivation and relationships, and the mysteries of human nature.[19]

## Important Themes

In the religious world of the Bible, in which God mingles with the political, social, economic, and domestic spheres, one may question the validity of separating them, as traditional theologies have done by opting for the military and the political realms as those in which God acts in favor of Israel. A feminist perspective requires that all themes, including the theological ones, also be considered. From Judges' polyphony, one may surmise that negotiations took place on important issues, settled only after long and hard discussions by every generation. Otherwise,

17. Athalya Brenner, "Women Frame the Book of Judges: How and Why?," in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, Texts @ Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 129–30, here 130.

18. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 117.

19. Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 42.

only one winning voice would have remained in the text. Thus, leadership models (including but not restricted to kingship and judgeship), treatment of each other in times of war (particularly inter-tribal conflict), treatment of women and children, the role of religious leaders (particularly the Levites), and the proper relationship to YHWH (particularly as it is played out in every kind of friendly relationship between Israelites and their neighbors) are all issues coming up time and again in the book. Many of these issues involve extreme violence, both physical (dismemberment, rape, human sacrifice, murder, war) and psychological (blaming the victim, individualizing people because of their dialect, lying, expelling children because of their mother's status, and others); violence was, and certainly is, a key issue in the world. Violence is a complex phenomenon, for which there is no easy answer. Perhaps that is one reason why Judges is also not an easy book.

At times the book seems to be the result of an obsessed mind, taking up the same issues over and over and giving them a different spin as the text runs. For instance, "brother(s)," אח (plural אחים), appears in Judges 1 twice to speak of Simeon as Judah's kin in their joint takeover of their land and once to speak of Caleb's brother, Othniel's father (the same reference is repeated in 3:9); they all have positive connotations. The next use of the term is surprising indeed: it appears no fewer than thirteen times in relation to Abimelech's sibling rivalry (8:19–9:56); finally, it is used five times in the story of the *pîlegeš*-wife's rape[20] and the ensuing war, which are contexts where peace and harmony are lacking.

### *Violence and "Foreignness"*

Another pressing issue is that of the constituency of this new entity called "Israel" and what are the criteria for inclusion or exclusion. I have not been able to make up my mind as to the extent to which this is a problem in the book of Judges and to what extent it is our modern inability to decide whether the Shechemites, for instance, were considered part of Israel or not—or even to decide if such a case was an issue. It might seem a moot point, yet half of Abimelech's blood proceeded from this group, and this connection is what prompted the lords of Shechem to support him as king (Judg 9). We will see more on this throughout the book, since at least two deliverers, Othniel and Jael, come from groups

20. This term is usually translated "concubine" or "secondary wife." See below, n. 25, p. 96, in the commentary on Judg 6–9 on the term *pîlegeš*.

other than the twelve tribes. But the point of bringing it up here is to recognize that ethnic boundaries and ethnic mutual recognition do play an important role in Judges; a role that is far from consistent throughout the book; and a role that particularly affects women, often seen as "foreign" even in their own land.

Foreign relations in Judges is also important from a feminist standpoint because of the patriarchal fear of foreign women, evident in several texts but particularly poignant in postexilic wisdom literature (especially in Proverbs). In Judges, exchange of women with the peoples of the earth means a danger to Israel from the very beginning of their settlement on the land: "So the Israelites lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and they took their daughters as wives for themselves, and their own daughters they gave to their sons; and they worshiped their gods. The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs" (Judg 3:5-7). And while their daughters might leave Israel to become members of Hittite, Canaanite, or Jebusite families, and one does not hear about them again, indigenous girls brought in to be their sons' wives are blamed for Israel's apostasy. Fair enough, all Israel is rebuked and chastised for leaving their God, not only the foreign wives.

Nevertheless, such texts are ideologically dangerous, because they instill nationalism based on fear of the different ones, which then turns into permission to kill. If we look carefully, the divine messenger's rebuke is worded not in terms of annihilating the local population, but in terms of keeping their alliance to YHWH by avoiding intermarriage with the local population and tearing down their altars (2:1-5). Yet, the usual reading of Judges's numerous battles and murders is "If you cannot mingle with them, kill them."[21] Is that what the text really says? "Israelites who listen as the text is read aloud are given four warnings. First, stay loyal to Yahweh. Second, do not lose your national and religious identity. Third, do not assimilate with the inhabitants of the land. And fourth, Yahweh will use any means to retain your covenant loyalty; he may summon

21. The root חרם, "utterly destroy," appears in this book only in 1:17 and in 21:11; the latter is particularly important, because the ones to be destroyed are all inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead except for the girls to become abducted for Benjamin. See also Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio*, 158, who notes that no judge orders utter destruction of a city.

oppressors and he may not answer when you call."[22] Are there ways to pay heed to these warnings without subscribing to mass killings? That is, indeed, a theological question, one that every generation has to face, negotiating between dying to assimilation, killing to keep one's identity safe, or finding a third way.

### *Domestic Relationships as a Mirror of Society's Relationships*

Relationships are always complex and those depicted in Judges are no exception. Already in chapter 1 the last hero from the wilderness generation promises his virgin daughter as a war prize to the one who would take the city of Kiriath-sefer. In this way, he identifies the one who will likely take the post and makes sure he remains closely related to him by marriage. Patriarchal systems need "right" women as wives and mothers (notably, here nothing is said of children) and use them as bridges between families and/or groups with little or no consent from the women involved.[23] Within this conventional practice, the arrangement is ideal: a courageous kinsman marries an obedient woman. Other family relationships are hinted at but never made explicit in Judges. Notably absent are mothers: important women such as Achsah, Deborah, and Jael (and even the unnamed *pîlegeš*-wife in chap. 19) are not depicted in their role as mothers (except for the honorary title of "Mother in Israel" for Deborah, 5:7). In other particular situations, such as those of Abimelech and Jephthah, the mother's low status has been transferred to the son. Most families in Judges ignore mothers; so, it is difficult to know who they are and whether or not they are alive. For instance, Achsah appears in relation to her father Caleb; Jephthah's daughter in relation to her father and her peer; and the Levite's *pîlegeš*-wife seeks her father's household, and no mother is mentioned. One last example is that of Samson's three liaisons; only the Timnite's father and sister are mentioned, but no mother.

Comparison of these domestic relationships leads readers to notice a deeper deterioration, which involves the whole society, from external

22. Ryan, *Judges*, xii.

23. In the last chapters of the book, other father–daughter–husband triangles will be disastrous: first, the unnamed *pîlegeš*-wife, her father, and her husband/owner (19:1-10), and later the abducted women from Shiloh, their Benjaminite captors-husbands, and their fathers, threatened and unable to protect them (21:19-23).

enemies to internecine destruction; from an orderly army to vindictive skirmishes; from fighting hard for a wife to throwing one's wife to an angry mob to be raped and then abducting girls for wives; from a generation that had known their God to a generation that needs a king because they no longer recognize their Divine King. One could infer a message from these stories: that is, the better the weakest members of society are treated, the stronger a society can be.

### *Orphanhood and Sibling Rivalry*

"Orphanhood" conveys loss, vulnerability, and sadness. At least the first two situations, loss and social vulnerability, accompany the biblical orphan (and the widow) as Deuteronomy 24:17; 2 Kings 4:1-7; Job 24:9; and several other texts seem to indicate. Israel's situation after Joshua's death at the beginning of the book of Judges may be seen in this light: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam have departed, and now also Joshua—and the torch is being passed on to Caleb. It is not hard to imagine people asking each other, "What shall we do now? How shall we relate to YHWH now?"

And how does this "orphanhood" situation relate to the notable absence of mothers in the book of Judges? The loss of a father is not the loss of a mother. Worthy of notice is the fact that, although many women died in child labor, not much is said in the Bible about being a child without a mother. And, although several texts speak of "orphans" without specific mention of a father's or a mother's death, association of orphanhood to widowhood and to lack of social stability makes scholars think of an orphan only as fatherless child.

Patriarchal families with a strong elderly figure—it does not matter whether father or mother—often fall into fratricide when that strong figure weakens or disappears.[24] Power interests aside, such children seem not to be able to relate to each other except in unhealthy competitive ways. The book of Judges begins with Joshua's death and Caleb's offering of his daughter to the new generation's strong man. No one remains from the wilderness generation. This aspect prompts the questions: Would the sons (and daughters) be able to grow, or would they kill each other?[25] To

24. Gideon's children or King David's sons striving for the throne (2 Sam to 1 Kgs 3) are some examples.

25. Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 1, notes the different deaths of men and women in Judges.

what extent can the Israelites build their identity apart from the people of the land if they do not have a "father-like figure" watching over their shoulders? Would they try to suppress the differences by assimilating, by ignoring each other, or by killing? These challenges, present from the very first verses of the book, are never resolved.

### *Religious Rituals*

Yet another subtheme running throughout the book is that of religious rituals. Not only are there vows to YHWH from the very start, but there are also inquiries about battle order and timing ("Who shall come up first?"; 1:1), human sacrifices, offerings to YHWH (6:26; 13:15-20; 21:4), and festivals (21:19). The number of references is striking, and to the best of my knowledge, these have not received enough attention. While these are not strong enough to determine the structure of the book, they seem to provide a worthy motif that deserves further exploration.

### *Day and Night*

Day and night is an important motif in Gideon's story; until he is convinced that YHWH is really with him and will support him, Gideon acts during the night.[26] Night is a dangerous time, as when Abimelech ambushes the Shechemites (9:34), and, sadly, it becomes an important negative factor when a small group travels from Judah to Ephraim and arrives at Gibeah as the day dies (Judg 19).[27] The day/night motif can be further seen in Samson's story, with a different twist. Samson's visit to Gaza happens between sunset and midnight (16:1-2). The nighttime is somehow Samson's ally here, allowing him to go through the city gates and without any wound from the ambushed Philistines. Thus, night as danger for him is only hinted at in Delilah's affinity with this name, not in his nocturnal adventures. Important as this motif is, it should not be considered more than that; it is one important motif among others. It does not seem to determine a certain structure for the book, but again, it is an element in the story that deserves more attention.

26. Assis, *Self-Interest*, 43–46.

27. Weston Fields, "The Motif 'Night as Danger' Associated with Three Biblical Destruction Narratives," in *Sha'arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 17–32.

## YHWH's Role in the Book

A key issue in any theological reading is the way God is depicted (after all, theo-logy is what people say about God). Is the way God is presented consistent throughout the book of Judges? Is God male, or are there feminine divine traits? Does God interact with other characters? Which values does God foster? Mercedes Navarro Puerto, for instance, considers that a God free enough to give his/her Spirit to a leader for liberation cannot be coerced by a vow that would ensure a certain result.[28] Thus, God's silence does not mean compliance with violence toward women. This is an important point for theology from a feminist perspective, for we live in societies that only take a "no" when it is uttered in a brutal situation. In other words, the authors' subtlety of having YHWH withdrawing from complicity with violence against women is a message, even if it is not immediately apparent. On the other hand, a God who withdraws and leaves the weaker members of society on their own is also a God whom we should hold accountable for ethical implications.

## What Does a Feminist Reading of Judges Mean?

This is one of the most difficult questions to answer. Starting with a definition of feminism that represents my convictions, what else may be said beyond believing that "feminism is the radical notion that women are people"?[29] Women are not the only ones not fully valued as persons, but children, the elderly, people with physical, emotional, or neurological disabilities, and other groups are often treated as less than full human beings. Yet, criticism of the current state of the world does not necessarily mean "feminist": the Bible is acutely aware of what it calls sin or iniquity and is not a feminist book. Likewise, liberation theologies have raised their voices against socio-economic injustices for many decades without noticing injustice toward females or the lack of female voices in their own midst.

I would like to identify my feminist approach to the book of Judges as one stemming from a Latin American liberation theology in terms of the

28. Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio*, 158.

29. See Marie Shear, "Media Watch: Celebrating Women's Words," *New Directions for Women* (May/June 1986): 6, available at: https://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices?a=d&d=DGBHBCA19860601&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN----------1#, referred to by Beverly McPhail, "Feminism: A Radical Notion," http://www.beverlymcphail.com/feminismradicalnotion.html.

socio-political analysis of biblical texts and from much reading of gender and feminist theory. Since I do not live in the United States, when I speak of "feminism" or "feminist," I do not mean only US Anglo-Saxon feminism but also womanist, *mujerista*, and all sorts of beyond-the-borders feminisms.

I am well aware of the difficulties essentialist approaches create. I do not believe in essentialist characterizations of "womanhood" or "femininity" (whatever that is), such as "women are more caring," "women have maternal instinct," or "if women ruled the world, it would be different." Experience tells me that many women are more caring than many men, at least in terms of their own "property," including family. Whether that is essential or induced by education is another matter, and it does not apply to every woman. Furthermore, women in leadership positions seldom demonstrate they are different from or act differently than their male colleagues. When speaking of patriarchy, we are speaking of a well-established and polished system running smoothly across cultures. This means that we should look further than the individuals in order to see the systems in which we are immersed, both as victims and as accomplices. Of course, the degree to which we profit from—or resist—such patriarchal systems makes a difference in our accountability.

The following questions point to the path I will take through the book:

- What gender roles can be detected in this story (expectations of males and females, main characters, subjects and objects of actions, belittling comments, etc.)?
- When a woman is presented, what features are hers? Are they different from those of a man? (For instance, is Deborah's leadership as a judge different from that of any other judge? What makes her "a woman"?)
- What reading of this passage would be different from that of a traditional commentary?
- What is particularly shocking in socio-economic terms; in terms of gender, class, age?[30]

30. I drafted these and some other questions as I thought of the invitation to write this commentary; later I found a similar list in J. Cheryl Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," in *Judges and Method*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 69.

- How can this text be read in such a way as to be both faithful to its historical context (to use the text as a springboard for our own fantasies is the biblical scholar's nightmare) and liberating for feminist believers in YHWH and for the church in the twenty-first century?

These questions might not be explicitly stated at every stage of the road as we walk through Judges, but they deserve consideration and should be made explicit here to my readers. Whether I succeeded in remaining faithful to the text, to my convictions, and to the readers' expectations is not mine to say.

# Judges 1:1–3:31

## *Beginnings of a Stormy Venture*

Judges 1:1–3:6 is generally taken as a "(double) prologue" (or "Introduction A," 1:1–2:5, when seen together with the second introduction, "Introduction B," 2:6–3:6) enveloping the book with its double dénouement (also dubbed "appendix") in chapters 17–21. That seems to be a remnant of a time when the "real stories" were only those beginning in Judges 3:7 and ending in chapter 16. Accordingly, the remaining chapters were the right frame for those stories yet somehow secondary and definitely ideological. In recent years, some commentaries have reintroduced discussion on the structure of the book and its overall ideology and theology, thereby giving most chapters their due. In other words, it is possible to look at chapters 1:1–3:6 and 17–21 as different from the stories about judges or deliverers (3:7–16:31). But in splitting the book in that way, we should be aware of our own lenses, which determine how we view the book's structure, themes, and theology.

The text runs smoothly from one episode to the next and cannot be split so easily into clear-cut pericopes. To take just one example, Judges 2:6-9 recaps Joshua's leadership of the people, his death, and his burial, which is the way the book started in Judges 1:1. It would seem that Judges 2:9 (+ 2:10), then, is a fitting place to close the pericope, seeing it as a kind of envelope structure. On the other hand, most commentaries set the break between Judges 2:5 and 2:6. Why? One may easily imagine

1:1–2:5 and 2:6–3:6 as parallel episodes, both prompted by Joshua's death but each one looking at its aftermath from a different angle. Imagine someone saying, "Well, we started off very well, didn't we (1:1-15)? But then, somehow, things got a little out of control (1:16–2:5)." Then a second voice would say: "Now, don't fool yourself: that generation after Joshua's death (2:6-10) sinned in great manner, as we know, and we also know the reason was YHWH getting tired of their faithlessness (2:11–3:6)." This commentary sees the subunits as follows: 1:1-15, 16-36; 2:1-5, 6-10, 11-23; 3:1-6, and 7-31.

## Prologue A (1:1–2:5)

*The Tribes, without Joshua, Start Their Exploits (1:1-4)*

The book begins with a kind of orphanhood situation (see "Important Themes" in this volume's introduction): after Joshua's death, the Israelites inquired of YHWH, "Who shall go up first for us?" The verb שׁעל usually refers to an oracular inquiry, and this may be the case here, although there is no sanctuary for the oracular consultation or specialist mentioned (priest or prophet, male or female). Generally, oracles are obscure, so one should not miss the double entendre. In this case, the answer given, "Judah will go up," may refer to that particular situation, but it may also refer to the late monarchic and postexilic concerns about "which tribe remains and which tribe will lead the way back to the land."[1]

From now on (according to the story line, not chronologically or factually speaking) there is no overall leader, none directly appointed and anointed by YHWH, whose authority would be (almost) unquestioned and who would be in direct contact with the divine, as Moses and Joshua had been. The situation points toward centralization over against decentralization (of power and of tribal organization). This will be one key issue at least until David is recognized as king over all Israel.

Joshua's death without a successor signals a paradigmatic change in Israel's leadership, a change made all the clearer in discussions, such as whether or not Israel needed a king, in the last chapters of Judges and the first portion of the book of Samuel. Even though at first sight kingship came much later to Israel, there are king-like hints in Joshua's and

1. Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges: A Commentary*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 3–4.

*Judges 1:1-4*

1:1After the death of Joshua, the
Israelites inquired of the LORD, "Who
shall go up first for us against the Ca-
naanites, to fight against them?" 2The
LORD said, "Judah shall go up. I hereby
give the land into his hand." 3Judah
said to his brother Simeon, "Come up
with me into the territory allotted to me,
that we may fight against the Canaan-
ites; then I too will go with you into the
territory allotted to you." So Simeon
went with him. 4Then Judah went up
and the LORD gave the Canaanites
and the Perizzites into their hand; and
they defeated ten thousand of them at
Bezek.

Gideon's descriptions, not to mention Abimelech's claim to rule (Judg 9) and Jair's thirty sons each riding their donkey and owning thirty towns in Gilead (Judg 10:3-5).

A different issue is the historical veracity of the text, about which there is currently much debate. In a sense, "centralization versus decentralization" was, is, and will be a key issue for people and society. The more centralized a society is the less room there is for diversification and, thus, for people other than "the ideal male" (i.e., other than the heterosexual, upper-class, educated, landed male with son/s to inherit). Centralization may mean governmental decisions, symbolic structures, even the hierarchical organization of a group or a land, or propaganda. And although centralization may be a helpful way of organizing diverse elements and giving them a sense of belonging and a particular location with regard to the whole, it has often meant suppression of differing voices and perspectives, from the smallest settlers described in the book of Judges to today's migrants, landless farmers, feminist groups, indigenous groups, and others. Perhaps the million-dollar question is how to provide (and then keep) a sense of unity between groups who have little in common?

Perhaps the story would have resulted otherwise if Joshua had continued to lead the people into the land. For better or for worse, Judges marks a new start because the strong leader, Joshua (following another one, Moses), is dead. His death is not to be celebrated, of course, but it moved (or should have moved) the people into a more responsible attitude. For one thing, had Joshua directed the land-taking operation, Judah and Simeon would not have come together. Joshua would have been the strong man commanding the situation and no "brother" would have asked for another brother's help. At least, this is what I gather as I compare this story with the one in Joshua 1:10-18, where the two and a

half eastern tribes, which have already been allotted their land, agree to help the remaining tribes in their fight for their land. The tribes respond to Joshua not only with actions but also with words that sound very similar to God's own words shortly before: "Only be strong and courageous" (Josh 1:9, 18). No doubt, the unity of the people is fundamental in both books, Joshua and Judges, as a prerequisite and as a consequence of possessing the land. But in Joshua that unity comes from the top down, so to speak: God commanded Moses that the eastern tribes should come along, Moses commanded the tribes, and now, Joshua repeats the same command and sees that it is carried out. In Judges 1, on the other hand, it is the selected tribe, Judah, who asks his brother to come along. There is a more horizontal kind of brotherhood or unity. Since this kind of horizontal relationship is extremely hard to find when there is a strong leader through whose hands all cords run, in a sense, being an orphan is an asset.

> Repeated references to the eastern tribes suggest a countertheme in Joshua, that of geographical and ethnic division and pluralism. The Deuteronomists take pains to assert the unity of Israel, but their very emphasis indicates that unity could not be taken for granted. . . . The compilers' struggle with pluralism and division in relationship to the unity and identity of Israel is also seen in the stories about different ethnic groups such as Rahab's family (Josh 2:1-24; 6:22-25) and the Gibeonites (Joshua 9).[2]

### *Judah Takes Jerusalem (1:5-8)*

After the first verses, in which this situation of new beginnings, new leadership, and settlement on the land are presented, verses five and following give the first example of what this whole enterprise is about. While Judah goes up and fights, it is YHWH who gives the land to them and defeats the enemies. The names of the different warring peoples and of the places taken are several and not all easily identifiable today. But the message is clear: Israel has the responsibility of taking the land from its inhabitants as a demonstration of their obedience to YHWH. And YHWH will give them the land as a demonstration of YHWH's faithfulness to the covenant made.

2. Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 17.

*Judges 1:5-8*

5They came upon Adoni-bezek at Bezek, and fought against him, and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. 6Adoni-bezek fled; but they pursued him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and big toes. 7Adoni-bezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has paid me back." They brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.

8Then the people fought against Jerusalem and took it. They put it to the sword and set the city on fire.

The right of the land's inhabitants to dwell on it is not brought up in the text, of course. What would seem to be a modern question, in fact, is not. Already in the biblical record, when the people (Israel) gain a particular land, it is presented as their right over the Perizzites or Canaanites; however, when Israel loses it to an invader (e.g., Assyria, Babylon, Rome), it is never the invader's right to claim that land. Yes, Israel's disobedience brought their loss, but it is always their land. Strangely, rights to a conquered land never expire, even in the twenty-first century!

Judges 1:5-8 offers the first war report, and immediately afterward the lens zooms in and a concrete example of the war's consequences for a defeated king is given. Here it is Adoni-bezek, lord of Bezek, whose thumbs and big toes are cut off as he is caught fleeing. Adoni-bezek (Adoni-zedek, king of Jerusalem according to Josh 10:1-3) gives his own verdict against himself: "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has paid me back" (Judg 1:7). It is characteristic of the Deuteronomist to put into non-Israelites' mouths (e.g., Rahab in Josh 2) some of his main theological perspectives.[3]

Considering the opening-like character of the chapter and its Deuteronomistic overtones, the reason for Adoni-bezek's words might be

3. See the introduction on foreignness. See also Dora Rudo Mbuwayesango, "Canaanite Women and Israelite Women in Deuteronomy: The Intersection of Sexism and Imperialism," in *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah*, ed. Tat-Siong Benny Liew (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 45–57; Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan and Mai-Anh Le Tran, "Reading Race Reading Rahab: A 'Broad' Asian American Reading of a 'Broad' Other," in Liew, *Postcolonial Interventions*, 27–44; Steed V. Davidson, "Gazing (at) Native Women: Rahab and Jael in Imperializing and Postcolonial Discourses," in *Postcolonialism and the Hebrew Bible: The Next Step*, ed. Roland Boer (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 69–92.

other than only "tit for tat." Susan Niditch observes, "The central theme is that power comes and goes, for the mighty fall. He who inflicts punishment may, with God's will, become the afflicted. . . . The rhythmic proverb, 'As I did, so God has repaid me,' is less an expression of Israelite or Judahite triumphalism than a warning, colored with pathos, about the vagaries of power."[4] Likewise, Tammi Schneider sees here a prophetic utterance, whereby "in the words of a foreign ruler the Israelites are already acting like the Canaanites."[5] In this way, Adoni-bezek's daily life was severely hardened beyond the impossibility of being priest or king.[6]

The story of Adoni-bezek stands in contrast to that of King Jehoiachin, who is presented as eating at the Babylonian king's table (2 Kgs 25:29). Even a defeated and humiliated king who sat at the king's table every day of his life must have gotten help with his everyday needs, I can imagine: there were plenty of prisoners and a whole "apparatus" to live a bearable existence in Babylon, even if blinded. This would not have been the case for Adoni-bezek, however, for it would have been against the socio-political model brought to the land by this group of escapees from Egypt.

> Another way of reading Judges 1–3 is to relate it to the larger story of which it is a part, Genesis–2 Kings. Adoni-bezek speaks of captured kings eating at his table. At the end of Kings, with the nation devastated and the people scattered, Jehoachin, king of Judah, eats at the table of his captor, the king of Babylon. Israel's dispossession, insists the narrator, has been divine punishment. Given this ending, Adoni-bezek's story reads like a parable. As Israel constantly breaks its covenant with God, as in the first chapters of Judges and as the story unfurls, what would be its just requital? A thumb for a thumb, so to speak, would have brought the story to a swift conclusion. As it turns out, the larger story from Judges to Kings seems to suggest more like a thumb for 70 thumbs. God "has a way of offering two springs of water instead of one, and requiting one thumb for seventy."[7]

4. Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 39, 40.

5. Schneider, *Judges*, 7.

6. John C. Yoder, *Power and Politics in the Book of Judges: Men and Women of Valor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 115–25.

7. David M. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 31.

***Rape-Atrocity in Judges***

Atrocity is an extreme act of evil or pain that physically harms another person. It is portrayed in Judges through a variety of forms, most repetitiously dismemberment and impalement. Characters minor and major, protagonist and antagonist, Israelite and non-Israelite, female and male, peasantry and royalty, as well as the socially vulnerable and powerful are all atrocified. No single group is isolated for atrocification in Judges. Rather, atrocity is the great equalizer. Adoni-bezek, King Eglon, Commander Sisera, Commanders Oreb and Zeeb, Abimelech, Samson, and the Levite's concubine all suffer the same fate—atrocity, gender-based shame or humiliation (GBSH), and death.

Beatrice Heuser's work on atrocity and military insurgency isolates three categories of atrocities deployed against warriors, but most significantly against civilian populations—rape, mutilation, and torture.[8] Where torture-atrocities are rare in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Adoni-bezek) and mutilation-atrocities are common (e.g., Eglon, Sisera, Oreb, and Zeeb), rape-atrocities are selectively portrayed across the Deuteronomist History and Prophets. Female characters (e.g., Levite's concubine) and female-personified cities (e.g., Zion) are portrayed suffering malevolent sexual acts in times of war emphasizing two factors—powerlessness and shame or humiliation. The premortem sex act is public and made spectacle by rape participants or onlookers. Male characters, rather, can be portrayed suffering torture- and mutilation-atrocity primarily and rape-atrocity through allusion not indication.

In Judges, select non-Israelite male characters suffer mutilation-atrocity—where a part or area of the body is the focus of the attack with force or repetition greater than needed to kill (i.e., stomach/womb, head)—and to which rape is alluded through corresponding GBSH. In these cases, objects other than genitals serve as penetrative objects (i.e., weapons, household tools); spatial location of altercation, penetration location, and body positions frame the atrocification pseudo-sexually. Mutilation-atrocity that alludes to rape-atrocity of male characters emphasizes power subversion and victim-shaming, thus compounding the dehumanization of the character.

Male and female characters function as assailant and

8. Beatrice Heuser, "Atrocities in Theory and Practice: An Introduction," *Civil Wars* 14, no. 1 (2012): 2–28.

atrocified. Though gender roles portrayed in biblical literature commonly reflect the patriarchal socio-cultural norms of their biblical Levant production, often ascribing power to men and powerlessness to women, subverted expectations are threaded through the rhetoric of Judges. Women exhibit power with great variety—Achsah (1:12-15), Deborah (4–5), Jael (4–5), and the certain woman with an upper millstone (9:53)—and men made powerless are depicted with nuance and particularity—Adoni-bezek (1:4-7), Eglon (3:12-30), Sisera (4–5), Zebah and Zalmunna (8:5-21), Samson (13–16).

Descriptions of rape-atrocity in Judges range in detail: direct indication (i.e., Levite's concubine), through gender-based shame (i.e., Eglon and Sisera), indirect indication (i.e., daughters of Shiloh), secondary indirect indication (i.e., Sisera's mother). The atrocified characters never speak of the events themselves, for their stories end at the spectacle of their death post-attack. Their character bodies are splayed for other characters and readers to encounter the horror with the twists of humor, celebration, and ghastliness built into the rhetoric of each episode. Judges captures the malevolence and trauma of rape. For where does one begin to speak about acts so dehumanizing that today's world considers it a crime against humanity?

*Corinna Guerrero*

### *Achsah, the Right Wife for the Conqueror Othniel (1:9-15)*

After defeating Jerusalem, Judah went further south, with several successes, identified by geographical location and by names from defeated kings. Just as the Jerusalem report is complemented by the Adoni-bezek anecdote, the Debir/Kiriath-sepher report is adorned by another anecdote, to which we turn soon. The number of names (geographical and personal) and name changes in this chapter are remarkable, many of which have to do with cities conquered and renamed. They reflect Israel's identity concerns as chapter 1 was written or added to the book (in postexilic times).[9]

Several personal names have already appeared in this chapter, many of which go unnoticed because they belong to the "Canaanites" and are meant to be dismissed: Sheshai, Ahiman, Talmai, and, of course, Adoni-bezek.

9. I have dealt more thoroughly with these issues in "¿Cómo hacerse un nombre sin negar otros nombres? Identidad y conquista a partir de Jueces 1," in *Con la mirada en el Mesías, de la mano del pueblo: Libro en homenaje a Néstor O. Míguez*, ed. Pablo Ferrer and Daniel Beros (Buenos Aires: ISEDET, 2014), 15–48.

*Judges 1:9-15*

9 Afterward the people of Judah
went down to fight against the Ca-
naanites who lived in the hill coun-
try, in the Negeb, and in the lowland.
10 Judah went against the Canaanites
who lived in Hebron (the name of He-
bron was formerly Kiriath-arba); and
they defeated Sheshai and Ahiman
and Talmai.
11 From there they went against the
inhabitants of Debir (the name of Debir
was formerly Kiriath-sepher). 12 Then
Caleb said, "Whoever attacks Kiriath-
sepher and takes it, I will give him
my daughter Achsah as wife." 13 And
Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger
brother, took it; and he gave him his
daughter Achsah as wife. 14 When she
came to him, she urged him to ask her
father for a field. As she dismounted
from her donkey, Caleb said to her,
"What do you wish?" 15 She said to him,
"Give me a present; since you have set
me in the land of the Negeb, give me
also Gulloth-mayim." So Caleb gave
her Upper Gulloth and Lower Gulloth.

None of these have any patronymic; the most that they own as they are defeated is their first names. Then, there are those general names, including "Perizzites" and "Canaanites," and those of Israel's tribes (so far, Judah and his brother Simeon). With no introduction at all, now in Judges 1:12 the narrator says, "And Caleb said [ויאמר כלב]." So, here there is a new character, yet not quite new. For the reader will recall that Joshua and Caleb were the only two spies from the delegation of twelve sent by Moses to spy the land who came back thinking the land could be conquered (Num 13–14). That the narrator takes for granted that readers will recognize Caleb is evident also in the fact that he is not even identified by his father's name, "Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenezite," as in Numbers 32:12 and other texts.

There seem to be conflated traditions with regard to Caleb's ancestry (evident also in the different textual variants), as his nephew or brother Othniel is always presented as son of Kenaz or Kenezite but not related to Jephunneh, or there may be here looser family ties. Be that as it may, Caleb is, in Judges, the only one who remains from the older generation, the generation that experienced the exodus, the generation punished with death because of their lack of faith. In this sense, Caleb may have been even more important than Joshua to have survived him. Maybe he was just younger and survived him. Or maybe he was less of a strong leader, the ideal nexus to ensure the first steps into the land, until the first judge be appointed. We cannot know; the text does not tell us what his abilities were or what were God's reasons to keep him to survive Joshua. A few texts, like Deuteronomy 1:36, say it was "because of his complete fidelity to the Lord."

Caleb makes a rather dramatic entrance into the scene, uttering a promise to a would-be hero: "Whoever attacks Kiriath-sepher and takes it, I will give him my daughter Achsah as wife" (Judg 1:12). There are several interesting aspects to this short sentence. First of all, there is the patriarchal aspect, which allows him to give away his daughter as a trophy—an aspect of society to which we will come back soon.[10] Second, there is the assumption that his daughter Achsah is worth the risk of taking an enemy city. Third, the village to be taken holds the telling names of "the village of the book" (קרית־ספר), then changed into the "holiest village" or the "village of the speech" (דביר), about whose significance we may speculate but may not know.[11] Finally, I wonder whether such a promise could be made and was in effect made by any father or whether it was possible because of Caleb's leadership, a leadership position that would not be surprising in response to his stand, already leading in a sense, as the spies had come back and he and Joshua had been vocal in advocating for YHWH. Nevertheless, nowhere in Joshua or Judges, or elsewhere for that matter, is that leadership made explicit.

The hero who gets the city and the wife is Othniel, the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. Othniel is the first to be introduced as judge in chapter 3, but there is no official presentation for him as yet, only in relational terms, as son and as younger brother. In good old Abrahamic fashion, Othniel marries his closest kin, his cousin (or niece), Caleb's daughter Achsah. Beyond historical or even narrative accuracy,[12] it would also be possible to see in this story an argument about political alliances through marriage as ideal for this new people. Caleb is given a voice, Othniel is presented as the bravest soldier, Achsah is given the best possible husband, political intermarriage is affirmed, and the Canaan-

10. According to Shulamit Valler, "The Story of Jephthah's Daughter in the Midrash," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4, 2nd ser. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 50–55, Caleb's and Jephthah's vows were inappropriate because they put people other than themselves at risk.

11. Danna Nolan Fewell, "Deconstructive Criticism: Achsah and the (E)razed City of Writing," in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 124, states that "the first bits of slippery language that we notice are the place-names."

12. According to Josh 14:6-15, Caleb was eighty-five years old as he claimed the region of Hebron, drove away its inhabitants the Anakim, and gave rest to the land, and he died at 110 (Judg 2:8). "Caleb's younger brother" may apply to Othniel or to Kenaz.

ites—well, they perish, as decreed by the God, who is taking possession of the land. Mieke Bal also considers this marriage a "triply proper" gift:

> The gift of Achsah, the daughter of Caleb, to the victor of the city of books is promised in a vow that functions as the perfect riddle: its outcome is unpredictable while its answer, in retrospect, produces the *gibbor* who is to be the model judge. The military issue is "proper": the city to be conquered is part of the promised land. . . . The gift is also "proper" on the level of sexual relations, since it is not only endogamous within the tribe, but even within the clan, the family. . . . Chiefhood is thus handed over from elder to younger brother. In this respect, the marriage between Achsah and Othniel is a model also in that it avoids the problem of the conflict between patrilocy and virilocy, both being of the same clan. A-conflictual, the gift is triply proper and can be seen as the core which generates, by antithesis, the problematic cases that elaborate on each of this gift's "properties."[13]

Othniel is the only one among the twelve leaders (saviors or judges) who is depicted in what would be similar to a modern Western heterosexual, monogamic family situation.

Another issue raised by this passage concerns whether Caleb, Othniel, and Achsah are Israelites or not. This is important because Caleb is the first man and Achsah the first woman to receive land belonging to the territory of Judah. According to the Joshua account (Josh 14:6-15; 15:13-19), Caleb the son of Jephunneh, a non-Israelite, a Kenizzite, was given land because of his faithful service as a spy. At the very beginning of Judges the three names reappear, but now he is only "Caleb" while his youngest brother is "Othniel, the son of Kenaz" (Judg 1:13). Since Judah is given the honor of starting the land-taking and this is the first recorded taking of enemy land, it seems to imply that Caleb (thus, his daughter) and Othniel belong to Judah.[14] The issue is more important in Judges than in Joshua because of its exemplary character accorded by being set at the very beginning of the book.

13. Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 149.

14. Most commentators take this position; see, for instance, Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 131, who describes them as belonging to "two tribal groups closely associated with Judah," while on p. 95 she had taken them to be non-Israelites (probably because that is how they are described in the book of Joshua). This would accord also with the ambiguous biblical witness; compare Num 34:19, which reads, "These are the names of the men: Of the tribe of Judah, Caleb son of Jephunneh," with Num 32:12, which says, "Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite."

***Sexual Minorities (SM) versus Family Values***

Of the twelve liberators-caudillos ("judges," six **major** and six *minor*), all except one appear to be sexual minorities.[15]

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 1. **Othniel**, 3:7-11 | Achsah, wife (1:11-15) |
| SM | 2. **Ehud**, 3:12-30 | Single? |
| SM | 3. *Shamgar*, 3:31 | Single? |
| SM | 4. **Deborah**, 4:1–5:31 | Prophetess, woman/wife? of/from Lappidoth (4:4) |
| SM | 5. **Gideon**, 6:1–8:35 | Polygamist, seventy children + concubine |
| SM | 6. *Tola*, 10:1-2 | Single |
| SM | 7. *Jair*, 10:3-5 | Polygamist, thirty children |
| SM | 8. **Jephthah**, 10:6–12:7 | Bastard, mother = prostitute (11:1); virgin daughter (11:37-38) sacrificed in fulfillment of Jephthah's vow |
| SM | 9. *Ibzan*, 12:8-10 | Polygamist, thirty daughters and thirty sons |
| SM | 10. *Elon*, 12:11-12 | Single |
| SM | 11. *Abdon*, 12:13-15 | Polygamist, forty children and thirty grandchildren |
| SM | 12. **Samson**, 13:1–16:31 | Married, separated + prostitute + Delilah |

In addition, Judges mentions two other sexual minorities: Micah (17:1-13) and the Levite of Ephraim with his concubine (19:1-10).

Taking his cue from the mischievous Samson (Judg 15:4-5), Martin Luther described his two principal enemies (the Vatican and the Anabaptists) as two female foxes that appeared to fight each other but actually were tied tail to tail, since both exalted a human word (from the pope or from the sect's prophets) above the Word of God in the Scriptures. Similarly, traditional commentaries and modern feminist studies, usually so opposite, have something in common: they look with disapproval on all the arrangements and adventures in Judges that did not support traditional family values. It is very difficult to imagine, however, that the authors of the individual narratives and of the two Deuteronomistic writings shared this perspective. Of the twelve "judges," Othniel (the first, 3:7-11; 1:11-15) is the only one who is presented with a wife (Achsah, an admirable Israelite woman), while Samson (the last, 13–16) is the one who enjoyed the most sexual adventures. Of the ten male liberators-judges after Othniel, we have four polygamists (Gideon, with his concubine; Jair; Ibzan; Abdon); four bachelors (homosexuals? Ehud, Shamgar, Tola, and Elon); Jephthah, who abandoned his

15. By "sexual minorities" the author refers to people who are not said to be in a heterosexual marriage.

wife; and Samson, "sleeping with the enemy" (his Philistine? wife), later with a prostitute, and, finally, fatally seduced by Delilah. And regarding the only female judge, "Lappidoth" (feminine plural, a name without parallels) may indicate another woman or a place and not a husband. Such a conclusion fits better with the strong personality of Deborah and with the fact that she continually appears in the text with Barak at her side and not "Lappidoth." We might easily suppose that she was a lesbian, since she seems a great deal like another military heroine, Joan of Arc, burned at the stake by the English for insisting on wearing male clothing (see Deut 22:5).

The scarcity of any biblical support for modern family values is due to the fact that in the Hebrew Bible the patriarchal "house" is larger than the modern nuclear family, while New Testament leaders (Jesus, Paul, etc.) prefer something narrower: unmarried itinerant teachers rather than married couples with children (see Rom 16). Like the prophets and prophetesses, the caudillos-liberators of Judges appear to be people of the Spirit, sexual minorities like the shamans, almost without exception. In addition to its lack of exemplary marriages, Judges describes various friendships between males that appear to have a homoerotic flavor (see Micah and the Levite, in Judg 17–19, whose most intimate relationships appear to be with males except for Micah's mother).

In addition to the first judge, Othniel (3:7-11) with his wife Achsah (1:11-15), the only respectable couple in Judges are Manoah and his anonymous wife (13:2-24), the pious parents of the scandalous last judge, Samson. At the beginning, however, the wife is a kind of sexual minority since she is "sterile," according to the prescientific concepts of infertility (13:2-3). Although the author of the account dignified Manoah by preserving his name, the angel of Yahweh preferred to dignify the wife and first appeared twice to her and only later to the husband (cp. the angel who appeared to Mary in Luke 1:26-38 and Joseph in Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13, 19-20).

Modern women may scorn Samson for being a "womanizer," but it is quite doubtful that the authors of the narratives and the Deuteronomistic editors who incorporated them into their framework shared this disdain. Instead of disqualifying Samson, we can learn how God anoints "unworthy" human beings with God's Spirit and does not allow certain sexual weaknesses to disqualify them for God's service (see Cyrus, Isa 45). We should not be surprised that the Spirit of Yahweh, who gave Samson so much physical energy, also had its manifestation in the erotic/affectionate sphere—although we should recognize the lack of wisdom and justice in the sexual life of the last liberator.

Without doubt the final narratives (the rape of the Levite's concubine and the resulting civil war, Judg 19–21) illustrate the urgency of a new order (the monarchy), but such recognition does not justify the conclusion that the book describes a continual degeneration. Best recognize that the individual Judges narratives support no rigid philosophy/theology of the history—neither purely cyclical nor degenerative. The individual stories are "squeezed into" the Deuteronomistic framework (with its insistence on idolatry as almost the only sin), but this framework squeeze cannot eliminate the strong manifestations of individuality and strength that reflect the diversity of God's ways in history and God's delight in carrying out the divine project through quite diverse human beings always ready to surprise us. A wise hermeneutic in the interpretation of Judges must always maintain a strong dialectic between the framework's Deuteronomistic theology and the individuality inherent in each narrative.

Ehud (3:12-30), the liberator-leader who freed Israel from the oppression of Eglon, the fat Moabite king, was both unmarried and left-handed. Although Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes manifests a certain scorn against left-handed persons (10:2) and many biblical texts reflect the common prejudices of the majority, which gives special honor to the right hand (see Jesus seated "at the right hand of God" in Ps 110; Matt 22:44; Col 3:1; Heb 1:13; and in the Apostles' Creed), the subversive role that Deborah and other women played in Judges subverts patriarchal prejudices. Similarly, Ehud fulfills his function in the face of the common prejudices against left-handed persons—prejudices embodied in the vocabulary and in the common expressions in almost any language: see "right," whose omnipresence in English subtly supports traditional oppressive ideologies, both secular and religious. In 1963 the Quakers of England declared that "to be homosexual is to be sexually left-handed"—a prophetic perception, since it indicated that a homosexual orientation is simply a normal human variant and not a perversion, a degeneration, a vice or an illness. As the second of the twelve liberators-leaders, Ehud by no means represents a degeneration, compared with the first judge Othniel. On the contrary, the text highlights, with detailed description, his astute military strategy to triumph against more powerful enemies-oppressors. The Hebrew text literally says Ehud was "restricted" with reference to his right hand but, as a "disabled" person, he learned to utilize this limitation and

> to develop the capacity of his left hand to a surprising and effective degree.[16] According to prescientific concepts, everyone prefers the right hand and relationships with the opposite sex, and to be left-handed or homosexual is an indication of a problem. Ironically, Judges informs us that Ehud, the left-handed one, was of the tribe of Benjamin (3:15, literally, "son of the right hand"), and at the end of the book we are told that seven hundred of the best warriors of this tribe were left-handed (20:15-16). By no means should we conclude that Ehud, the left-handed person, represented a degeneration compared with Othniel.
>
> *Thomas Hanks*[17]

The name Achsah ("bangles, adornments") appears in the Bible five times (three of which occur in our text in Judges and one more in its parallel in Josh 15). In Joshua, she "is one of only two women to be identified," as noted by Lillian Klein.[18] There is finally a genealogical note in 1 Chronicles 2:49, where she is mentioned as Caleb's daughter alongside several male relatives, mentioned before her (brothers, half-brothers, etc.). This is interesting, for daughters appear alongside sons when they are so weighty on their own merit that they cannot be erased, such as Miriam the prophet and singer. Otherwise, they come to the fore when there are no sons, such as Zelophehad's five daughters (Num 26:33). The most telling case for their appearance alongside male relatives is when they "mean trouble." Dinah the daughter of Jacob (Gen 34:1) and Tamar the daughter of David (2 Sam 13:1) are some of the stories to be recalled.[19] Which of these reasons merit the Chronicler's remembrance of Achsah? There is no trouble associated with her in the text; centuries of exegesis, however, have also managed to make her into a nagging wife.[20] Achsah's surprising appearance mounted on a donkey to request from Caleb springs of water is reminiscent of Goddess Anath's "adolescent" behavior.[21]

16. Schneider, *Judges*, 47–49.

17. Thomas Hanks, *Subversive Hebrew Bible*, Judges 9–11, at: http://www.fundotrasovejas.org.ar/ingles/ingles.html.

18. Lillian R. Klein, "Achsah: What Price This Prize?," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4, 2nd ser. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 18.

19. Also when there are no sons, such as Zelophehad's five daughters (Num 26:33).

20. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*, 25–28; Klein, "Achsah," 23.

21. Neil H. Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth*, SBLDS 135 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 94.

Verse 14 sets her on the scene. Three verbs are used, all of which allow for more than a unique interpretation. The first one is an infinitive of the verb בוא, "to come, to go into," with a third feminine singular suffix. The fact that it is not a finite verb allows the suffix to work as subject or as object of the verb. Thus, most translations have "when she came *to him*" (although the Spanish Reina Valera version [rev. 1995] has "when she was leaving with him," "cuando ella se iba con él"). Schneider is right that the reverse interpretation is equally possible and, since the verb "to enter" often has a sexual connotation, and this is the first verse after their marriage arrangement, it may be understood as "As she entered her husband's wedding chamber."[22] If this interpretation is correct, the reference to sexual intercourse would be yet one more connection between Achsah and the dismembered woman in Judges 19. The second verb to be noted is the third feminine of the root סות translated as "urged" (see "Translation Matters" box).

**TRANSLATION MATTERS**

On verse 14, the MT parses the verb סות as third feminine causative, "allure" or "instigate" (subject, "she"; object, "him": Achsah would urge Othniel to request water basins from Caleb). The LXX (followed by several modern scholars) inverted them, so that he is the subject of the action: if the lands belong to her father, it must be (a greedy) Othniel who entices Caleb's daughter to ask for them. Considering that it is Achsah who goes to make a request from her father, the LXX seems to have corrected the verb subject to agree with the actual action. On the other hand, ascribing the plan to Othniel steals any initiative from her, making her only the puppet of her husband's vision (and turning Othniel into a manipulative husband). Another proposal is taking the infinitive "to ask" as a gerund.[23] In this way, Othniel is absent: he has no business at all between a daughter and her father.

Finally, there are several proposals for the verb צנח, translated "dismounted," because Caleb's question to her, "What's the matter?" seems to imply some kind of strange action on her behalf. It may well be, however, that what prompted his surprise (if that is indeed conveyed by his question) is the sight of a married woman coming alone on a donkey

22. Schneider, *Judges*, 12.

23. Paul G. Mosca, "Who Seduced Whom? A Note on Joshua 15:18//Judges 1:14," *CBQ* 46 (1984): 21.

(implying a long-distance trip), unaccompanied by her husband and perhaps unexpectedly—just as the *pîlegeš*-wife's unexpected appearance at her father's house must have taken him by surprise (Judg 19:2).[24] The verb appears in third feminine singular form only in this story, in its parallel in Joshua, and in Judges 4:21 to describe Jael's action when she pierces the tent peg through Sisera's temple. Thus, a meaning in the line of letting fall (an object or one's body) would cover the three instances. On the other hand, the Greek and Latin versions add sighing and crying to her appearance. This would comply with the idea (still in vogue) that women would get more if they appeal to male compassion.

In verse 15 we have Achsah's only utterance (along with its parallel in Josh 15). According to the MT, as she dismounted, Caleb asked her, "What do you wish?" or "What is the matter?" as if realizing or knowing already she had come with a request.[25] Achsah then asked her father for springs or pools along with the land, getting the Upper and Lower Gullot (1:15). From a different angle, William Hallo looks at this short story in relation to the proverb on the leeches (Prov 30:15a) and the two subterranean springs called "of the upper leech" and "of the lower leech," respectively: "What we have then is, on the one hand, an enigmatic proverb about two insatiable leeches, and, on the other, the story of Achsah importuning her father for a blessing and receiving upper and lower pool(s) or well(s) near the city of Devir ( = Khirbet Rabud) which to this day is located near 'the upper well of the leech' and 'the lower well of the leech', respectively."[26] I find most challenging Hallo's attempt to connect dissimilar references, such as the proverb of the leeches, the story of Achsah, and the modern Arabic name of the two pools identified by archaeologists as the probable location of Debir.[27] What deserves further consideration here is his comment on Achsah as a *femme fatale* and spoiled child who runs to her father crying "gimme, gimme."[28]

What to do with such a view? The inner-biblical allusion to the leech, detected by Hallo, may have been intended by the author when the

24. Schneider, *Judges*, 14.

25. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*, 25.

26. William W. Hallo, "New Light on the Story of Achsah," in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East; Essays in Honour of Herbert B. Huffmon*, ed. Louis Stulman and John Kaltner (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 332.

27. Usually Moshe Kochavi ("Khirbet Rabud = Debir," *Tel Aviv* 1 [1974]: 2–33) is quoted on this identification, also supported by later bibliography.

28. Hallo, "New Light on the Story of Achsah," 331.

verb יהב was used instead of נתן, but it may as well have been a hermeneutical consideration unintended by the author. But even if intended, who are we to say she was or was not a spoiled child? Achsah is not the only woman in Judges accused of that, as we will realize.[29] And why not? The biblical text neither supports nor denies it, since it gives her so little chance to express herself or her story. And parents—here a father—have spoiled sons and daughters throughout the centuries, to their children's harm. Worse: it is a patriarchal mechanism, by which to compensate the daughters' loss by marriage and the daughters' (and wives') submission by spoiling them. For in the end, what is given or accorded and what is denied in the spoiling act comes from the father's will, not the daughter's right.

Spoiled or not, this is the first nonmilitary story in the book, even though Achsah's marriage to Othniel is the outcome of the battle against and destruction of Kiriath-sepher. The positive answer to her request of water pools from her father may be read as an auspicious model to the way women relate to their husbands and fathers and to the land and its resources.

Noting several unconventional roles ascribed to women in Judges, Susan Ackerman has produced a balanced analysis of Israelite society, in which Jael, Sisera's mother, Delilah, and others are seen against the background of ancient Near Eastern mythological characters, particularly the goddess Anath. One of those characters is Achsah, whom she sees "as assertive, as practical, and as one who, at least to some degree, can lay claim to land ownership." This picture leads Ackerman to conclude that the picture has some grays besides blacks and whites:

> Judges at first glance seems to be a book about men. It is about the great men who led Israel during her premonarchical days. . . . It is about the mighty fighters who prevailed over Israel's foes. . . . It is about men's cunning strategies that confounded their enemies. . . . Yet scattered throughout this book of men there are numerous "Achsahs," women whose stories are interspersed with the tales of men and women who, like Achsah, exert themselves in the narrative as actors in their own right.[30]

29. Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter," *Prooftexts* 17 (1997): 279–98.

30. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 2, 3.

Even more auspicious (and thus, more contrasting to other women in Judges) is the degree of safety Achsah enjoyed. To be safe at home (both her paternal home and her husband's), to come and go safely, and even to have a name are not to be taken for granted in Judges.[31]

### *Military (Thus, Androcentric) Successes and Failures of the Northern Tribes (1:16-36)*

Getting land and water may be very pleasant and a token of Israel's blessings on the land, but the tribes still have a mandate to obey: to take the land from its inhabitants. So the remaining verses of chapter 1 move on to a panoramic assessment of the enterprise commanded by YHWH.

The first verses are devoted to Judah, according to the divine instruction at the beginning of the chapter. Curiously, the information on Judah is mediated by reference to a non-Israelite group, the Kenites, presented here as descendants from Moses' father-in-law (called Hobab in the LXX and some other versions, including NRSV; but the MT does not give any name aside from the Kenites). I am not sure what is the importance of this information for the redactor: Is it only to recognize groups that later became integrated, such as Rahab's family or the Gibeonites in the first chapters of Joshua? Or is this a proleptic introduction to the clan from which Jael and/or her husband would come, which will be mentioned in Judges 5:24 when Jael is blessed together with the group of Kenites?

Danna Nolan Fewell is on the right track when she observes that Judges, like Genesis, is a family quarrel in which the "Canaanite" side of the family lineage is denied (she speaks of matrilineal descendants), rewritten, blurred, written again, and so on, often through the killing of the "different." I would add "the different who is so like us," otherwise there would be no need to kill him or her.[32] Siblings and close relatives, like children who grow up together, are sometimes friends and sometimes rivals, and this is what we see happening with Israel and its "brothers." The problem is, they are not on the playground; their war game *is* war, no game.

This may seem a digression, yet it is not, for patriarchy uses this weapon called "courage, honor, male behavior," and the like, by which

31. Schneider, *Judges*, 17.

32. Danna Nolan Fewell, "Imagination, Method, and Murder: Un/Framing the Face of Post-Exilic Israel," in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book*, ed. Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn (London: Routledge, 1997), 140–46.

*Judges 1:16-36*

16The descendants of Hobab the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negeb near Arad. Then they went and settled with the Amalekites. 17Judah went with his brother Simeon, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath, and devoted it to destruction. So the city was called Hormah. 18Judah took Gaza with its territory, Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. 19The Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country, but could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain, because they had chariots of iron. 20Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said; and he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. 21But the Benjaminites did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have lived in Jerusalem among the Benjaminites to this day.

22The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel; and the Lord was with them. 23The house of Joseph sent out spies to Bethel (the name of the city was formerly Luz). 24When the spies saw a man coming out of the city, they said to him, "Show us the way into the city, and we will deal kindly with you." 25So he showed them the way into the city; and they put the city to the sword, but they let the man and all his family go. 26So the man went to the land of the Hittites and built a city, and named it Luz; that is its name to this day.

27Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, or

it gets rid of many (particularly low-ranking) men and several "expendables" (like women, children, animals, trees, etc.), blaming them. Something happens as the narrator goes on with the list of tribes, however, for what had started with so much success soon shows itself to be also flawed: Judah chose not to or could not rid the land of its more powerful enemies. Now, should Judah have fought anyway, in order to get the valley and expel "them"; or are we to understand the first part of the verse (which says that YHWH was with Judah and Judah took the hill country) as evidence that the hill country was what YHWH wanted to give to Judah? Of course, there is always recourse to source criticism, and one can "blame" later traditions for this wonderful gem of truth. But that would not solve the theological problem. For the question here is whether Judah's not taking the valleys should be seen matter-of-factly as a statement of its unfaithfulness, or with a sigh of relief. Here I am proposing another reading, besides the traditional one that "they couldn't." For many a person must have sighed with relief when they heard that

the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages; but the Canaanites continued to live in that land. [28]When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not in fact drive them out.

[29]And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer; but the Canaanites lived among them in Gezer.

[30]Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahalol; but the Canaanites lived among them, and became subject to forced labor.

[31]Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon, or of Ahlab, or of Achzib, or of Helbah, or of Aphik, or of Rehob; [32]but the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; for they did not drive them out.

[33]Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, but lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; nevertheless the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and of Beth-anath became subject to forced labor for them.

[34]The Amorites pressed the Danites back into the hill country; they did not allow them to come down to the plain. [35]The Amorites continued to live in Harheres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalbim, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labor. [36]The border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabbim, from Sela and upward.

their beloved ones, their sons, their husbands, their fathers, the soldiers themselves, would not be going head-on against the iron bars.

After Judah, Benjamin is mentioned. Preoccupation with the peoples Israel could not drive out of the land is highlighted also by the interruption of the *wayyiqtol* chain and the emphasis on the people Benjamin could not dispossess: "But/and the Jebusite, who resides in Jerusalem" (Judg 1:21). The downgrading of Benjamin at the expense of Judah is one of this book's characteristics. While Judah had killed the whole population of Jerusalem and set it on fire, now Benjamin is said not to have driven (not to have been able to or wanted to?) the Jebusites from it and, even worse, to have settled among them. Next, the town of Bethel (said to formerly have been called Luz) receives attention by way of the third anecdotic depiction: they made a deal with an inhabitant of Luz/Bethel, who agreed to give away his town to them (Judg 1:22-26). Niditch sees in this notice an indication that there is no polemic against the northern tribes here:

> In its current setting, the tale of the founder of Luz acknowledges the way in which power and control fluctuate. The people of the man from Luz are displaced by the descendants of Joseph, and he then goes off to found a city in the land of the Hittites. Within the narrative, the important message is that one Luz is gone and another established. The vision in Judges 1, in contrast to portions of Joshua, is of fluid and shifting power, a theme reinforced by all three vignettes.[33]

From a feminist perspective, it is noteworthy that, while so many commentaries stress Delilah's "betrayal" of Samson (even if we do not know whether she was Israelite), this unnamed man from Luz, who betrays his city (for unknown and perhaps justified reasons), goes unnoticed.[34]

The remaining tribes are treated summarily. Some facts deserve a quick mention before we leave chapter 1. The first one involves the character of Joseph for the northern tribes, parallel to Judah. Gregory Wong sees the material arranged in a chiastic way, rather than a progressive deterioration from south to north. Neither Judah (Judg 1:19) nor Dan (1:34) could take over their valleys from their indigenous populations, while the remaining tribes (i.e., "Joseph") managed only to dwell with the Canaanites and submit them to forced labor (Judg 1:21, 27-30, and 31-33).[35] Neither cohabitation with the peoples of the land nor forced labor is within the Deuteronomistic ideal picture for a people freed from bondage to leave each with enough land to have dignity. Perhaps, like war, they are inescapable in a world where economic gain has more weight than people; still, they do not belong to the ideal society.

> Implicit in Judges 1 is the theme of disobedience and judgment. The northern tribes fail to conquer major parts of their territories. While the list of their failures appears to be presented factually, hints arise of a theological explanation of the failures—that is, that military defeat is linked to disobedience. The description of the northern tribes' failure to

33. Niditch, *Judges*, 43. Other scholars disagree: Schneider, *Judges*, 21 reads this ruse against Judg 2:2 and therefore considers it a (veiled) criticism of Joseph's ways.

34. Also Rahab comes into this category, but we will stay within Judges here. See Bradley L. Crowell, "Good Girl, Bad Girl: Foreign Women and the Deuteronomistic History in Postcolonial Perspective," *BibInt* 21 (2013): 5; and Uriah Y. Kim, "Postcolonial Criticism: Who Is the Other in the Book of Judges?," in Yee, *Judges and Method*, 168, on the figure of the foreigner to advance the authors' own interests (that is, the foreigners' own interests, words, perspectives are unaccounted for; they are used to advance Israel's own ideology).

35. Gregory T. K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 92.

> take various cities says that they "did not" conquer them—not "*could* not," but "*did* not." The wording implies that the tribes could have obeyed God's order to drive out the native inhabitants of the cities, had they chosen to obey.[36]

The problem with disobedience is not disobedience per se but the worldview derived from following YHWH. The problem for Israel was the socio-economic, political, and cultural model derived from following "the Baals and the Astartes," as Judges 2:11, 13 denounces. The last chapters of Judges and later the monarchy will show all the horrible consequences of these choices, such as child sacrifice, perversion of justice, manipulation of religion, accumulation of land, and so on.

### *First Appearance of a Divine Herald (2:1-5)*

Chapter 2 begins, like many of the actions narrated in chapter 1, with the verb "come up," עלה. Here the one coming up is YHWH's messenger. The image is set in such a way as to build up suspense, at least in the audience, for it is not usual to learn of a divine messenger coming up from one geographical location to another. There might be another explanation, since Gilgal, etymologically related to a round thing, is the site in which Joshua gave Caleb his land (Josh 14:6) and Bochim is the site of weeping (although at the end of Judges, the community will weep at Bethel [Judg 20:26]). Thus, the narrator may be using symbolic names here to indicate the need to go back, turn around in weeping, or it may be a way to indicate that the Israelites did see someone coming up, but so far they could not recognize the divine messenger.

There is a long tradition of men and women to whom a messenger or group appears and at first they cannot know whether they are a "friend or foe" (see Josh 5:13), divine or human. Abraham, Sarah, Lot, and Samson's parents in Judges (Judg 13:1-7), are some examples. Likewise, it is not clear until the end of the pericope who are the recipients of this announcement. It starts with "I shall bring/have brought you [עלה *yiqtol*, second plural masculine suffix] from Egypt." This "you" turns out to be the people of Israel, who end up crying and thus name the place Bochim, "weepers."

36. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 127. Emphasis in original.

*Judges 2:1-5*

2:1Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, "I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you. 2For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done! 3So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you." 4When the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the Israelites, the people lifted up their voices and wept. 5So they named that place Bochim, and there they sacrificed to the Lord.

**TRANSLATION MATTERS**

*"I have brought you out"* (Judg 2:1): The verb עלה is in the *yiqtol* form, to be translated, in prose, as unfinished action, future; however, several translations render it as past tense. Carlos Sosa sees it as an *apropos* device to allude both to the past (Egypt) and to the future enterprise of taking the land.[37]

The main translation problem is whether the masculine participle בוכים, literally "the weeping ones," and the second plural pronoun כם, "you," are referring to the men from the different tribes warring to take the land from the indigenous population or whether they refer to the whole people, men unable to go to war (including priests), women, elderly, and children.

My questions intend to sharpen the scenario: Who is on stage? Is this a new scene, independent from the conquest annals of chapter 1? According to Barry Webb, "2:1-5 is the climax of the first major part of the introduction to the book," because they are part of a chiasmus around the theme of coming up (Hebrew עלה).[38] On the other hand, most scholars take Judges 1:1–2:5 as a unit, and, thus, the recrimination at Bochim would be related to the people's inability to "cleanse" the land:

37. Carlos R. Sosa, "Forma y función de Jueces 2:1-5; 6:7-10 y 10:11-16: Una comparación literaria y estructural," *Kairós* 46 (2010): 54.

38. Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 128. Contra Schneider, *Judges*, 26, who considers 2:1-5 a new unit, because it does not deal with leadership, as chapter 1.

> The priority, arrangement and proportion of space given to the portrayal of the tribes in Prologue-A (1:1–2:5) corroborates the thesis that the tribal-political arrangement of Judges was designed to enjoin its readers to endorse Judah as the tribe divinely appointed to lead the other tribes of Israel. Prologue-B (2:6–3:6) sets forth the cyclical religious-historical paradigm by which the religious-historical events presented in the delivered accounts of 3:7–16:31 are to be measured.[39]

The text does not offer temporal clues that would help us here: the opening verb, ויעל, is a *wayyiqtol*, thus resuming narration—"And the messenger came up"—without any adverb that would help us to temporally locate it; the fact that Judges 2:6 is analeptic and takes us back to Joshua's time does not help either. The change of style between the annals-like information on each tribe's failures and this short piece, which is mainly a direct speech, seems to indicate that the author's intention is to read this short piece separately.

The question remains: Who are "all the sons/children of Israel, the people" here? A definite answer is difficult to give because the arrangement of the narratives is so masterful that one is led nonstop from one event to the next. As we saw already, the question as to "who's in and who's out" is important in Judges. In Judges 1 the Israelites had the shape of tribes, allegiances, and expulsion; now in Judges 2, YHWH's people comes in the guise of a worshiping community that needs to learn not to let other gods interfere with its faithfulness to the only God of the freed slaves. The messenger's words resonate with references to the mighty acts of God during the exodus and the wilderness.

In this text there are no particular references to women, neither as a group nor as victims of patriarchal actions; the message is too general, filled both with promise (as God had decided never to break the covenant no matter what) and with a warning as to how ensnaring Israel's disobedience will be. Thus, estrangement from each other, crying, and even sinning will be taken within the loving and committed relationship of these partners, not on their own.

Thinking of today's gender roles, I notice that weeping is here the community's action, not the women's. Is this because in an ancient Middle Eastern society crying was an acceptable means of expressing regret also for men? Many texts affirm this. On the other hand, it is to the Dtr's credit to refrain from blaming idolatry on the Canaanite women, as he will later do (Judg 3:6; 1 Kgs 11:1-13).

39. Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3.

*Judges 2:6-10*

6When Joshua dismissed the
people, the Israelites all went to their
own inheritances to take possession
of the land. 7The people worshiped the
Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the
days of the elders who outlived Joshua,
who had seen all the great work that the
Lord had done for Israel. 8Joshua son
of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at
the age of one hundred ten years. 9So
they buried him within the bounds of
his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the
hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount
Gaash. 10Moreover, that whole genera-
tion was gathered to their ancestors,
and another generation grew up after
them, who did not know the Lord or the
work that he had done for Israel.

## Prologue B (2:6–3:6): Cultic Loyalty, a Key Element in Israel's Identity and Land Holding

*The Ideal View of the Beginnings (2:6-10)*

The so-called Introduction B presents a periodization of the time intended as a hermeneutical lens with which to read the book. It resumes where it all had started, with Joshua, his generation, and the tribes living each in its land. Then, everything was good. But as soon as that generation died, there arose a new generation who did not know their God. Just as Pharaoh had not known Joseph (and Joseph's God), now it is Israel who does not know. And if you do not know, you do not follow, for how would you recognize a deity's ways when you do not acknowledge that deity?

A people slow to acknowledge YHWH as their God was Moses' and God's struggle in Egypt, as Pharaoh defied YHWH's command; it continues as the judges rule, and it will get more critical as Israel and Judah become ever more oppressive toward its own people, like the Canaanite leagues before them. It is the inescapable truth that every generation is in danger of not knowing. "'Knowing' God, like knowing a person, is experiential and relational. . . . Not to know God is to abandon that relationship."[40] The relationship between YHWH and Israel is, for sure, very complex. Yet, despite all of the people's failures, YHWH had decided not to break up with Israel. And while God's stubborn commitment to God's people is to be celebrated, no automatic application of that model of faithfulness should be made to a violent relationship, particularly to one in which violence may lead to a femicide.

40. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 137.

*Judges 2:11-23*

[11]Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped the Baals; [12]and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. [13]They abandoned the Lord, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. [14]So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. [15]Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them to bring misfortune, as the Lord had warned them and sworn to them; and they were in great distress.

[16]Then the Lord raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. [17]Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord; they did not follow their example. [18]Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them. [19]But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. [20]So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel; and he said, "Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their ancestors, and have not obeyed my voice, [21]I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died." [22]In order to test Israel, whether or not they would take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their ancestors did, [23]the Lord had left those nations, not driving them out at once, and had not handed them over to Joshua.

### *The Cyclic View of History (2:11-23)*

The cycle of sin, punishment, distress-and-outcry, deliverance, peace, and faithfulness is rhetorically so effective that it has dominated biblical studies of the book of Judges, to the point that what does not conform has been either deemed an "appendix" (introduction and dénouement) or filled in. Carolyn Pressler notes that Israel's cry is not mentioned in Judges 2:11-23,[41] and Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher notes that neither is

41. Ibid., 138.

there a change in the people's attitude.[42] As long as no real repentance and amendment are present, death-dealing cycles (such as in domestic violence, or in self-destructive behaviors like Israel's in relation to God) will repeat over and over again.

**TRANSLATION MATTERS**

One issue to take note of is the use of the verb זנה for Israel's lust after other deities (Judg 2:17). The verb has two different yet interconnected meanings. The most literal sense is that of taking part in an illicit sexual act, always a female action in the Bible. For instance, Tamar's pregnancy is interpreted by Judah as an act of זנה until his own responsibility in it is revealed (Gen 38:24). A woman who engages in such a behavior, or seems to, is a זונה, often translated as "harlot" or "prostitute." While many women thus called in the Bible may have been sex workers, the issue is far more complicated in a society in which even legal sex was accompanied by gifts and where the biblical evidence shows several models of "marriage." Since there is only one use of the term with a possible sexual connotation in Judges 19:2, we will leave the discussion until then.

The other use of this root is not literal, and it applies to anyone (usually groups more than individuals, and among these, the elite, the political, social, and religious male leadership) who does not stay faithful to YHWH. This is the sense it has in this verse, and in Judges 8:27, 33, the only other occurrences of the root in Judges. Although this is a symbolic usage of the root זנה and it involves particularly males and not females in their political and religious—not sexual—behavior, it has contributed to gender stereotyping of women as lustful, prone to promiscuity, and dangerous to men.

YHWH cannot but be faithful to YHWH's compassion and raises a savior, thus denying any mechanical application of the cycle of sin-punishment-outcry-deliverance. This variation in the model is very insightful because it also refers back (perhaps inadvertently) to the time when the people were slaves in Egypt and were too burdened even to cry out aloud to YHWH (Exod 5). There is a cycle, yes, but rather than seeing in YHWH an administrator of blessings and curses, there is here a lover trying out different ways to carry on the relationship. "Lover" in the biblical text is (mainly, not always) the male YHWH who entices the female Israel, but this metaphor today is no longer enough. On the one hand, one must be alert to its inherent violence; on the other hand, there is need for much more nuanced metaphors on love relationships, as gender and sexuality are constantly evolving.

42. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "Framework and Discourse in the Book of Judges," *JBL* 128 (2009): 690.

*The Pedagogic View of the Military Actions (3:1-6)*

These verses look at Israel's history (and here one may surmise, from the exodus to the return from Babylon) as a process that served to teach Israel the art of war. On the one hand, someone who was learned in war techniques would appreciate these opportunities to try new tricks and to train their men. On the other hand, the reason given in verses 2-3 may also have been an excuse, just as when we say, "Well, how can I turn this nasty experience into a learning one?" Regardless of the writers' intention, their recognition that Israel had to live with other nations provides us with a clue that this book is not so univocal in its view of war and death.

In Judges 3:6 we find again the motif of the women given and taken as wives; unlike Achsah, the ones mentioned here are involved in "foreign trade." Women are the currency exchange between families from Israel and at least six nations. Bible authors rarely if ever reflect on the fate of their own daughters given away (in 3:1-6) to several nations; their concern is with foreign daughters brought into Israelite families.[43] Even though this practice might seem foreign and outdated to us, adult women and girls (and also some boys) are still either given in marriage without their consent or sold by their respective fathers/families to become part of trafficking networks.

To summarize, in order to appreciate the introduction of the book, it is necessary to accept Judges' presupposition that Israel's identity cannot be shaped outside its land—the land promised to Abraham and his family, unto which the Israelites have been coming for forty years since the exodus—and with a social and ethical behavior associated with expelling the Canaanites and tearing down their altars. As mentioned earlier, the question of a military, war-like campaign as *the* way to achieve this gift of land is a questionable one for modern interpreters. The question is to what extent the book of Judges is imaginable without this presupposition. Even though the book just starts to unfold its treasures, several voices compete for attention. Joshua and his generation are exonerated from any blame, yet the orphanhood situation he has left is not necessarily bad for Israel: now the tribes will have to deal with each other and

43. In Gen 31:50 we learn that Laban makes an accord with Jacob that Leah and Rachel will not be humiliated by having to accept further wives of Jacob. This is a notable text in that the daughters had earlier affirmed that their father had sold them (31:14-15). While they are married to their cousin, they move out of their homeland.

*Judges 3:1-6*

3:1Now these are the nations that
the Lord left to test all those in Israel
who had no experience of any war in
Canaan 2(it was only that successive
generations of Israelites might know
war, to teach those who had no ex-
perience of it before): 3the five lords of
the Philistines, and all the Canaanites,
and the Sidonians, and the Hivites who
lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount
Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath.
4They were for the testing of Israel, to
know whether Israel would obey the
commandments of the Lord, which he
commanded their ancestors by Moses.
5So the Israelites lived among the Ca-
naanites, the Hittites, the Amorites,
the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Je-
busites; 6and they took their daughters
as wives for themselves, and their own
daughters they gave to their sons; and
they worshiped their gods.

find new ways to achieve life on their land. Joshua is exonerated by the narrator from having left incomplete the destruction of the inhabitants of Canaan, so that Israel may be ensnared or tried or taught—the reader can choose the explanation. Ironically, YHWH's test of Israel (v. 1) also meant life for many people(s) not devoted to the ban or expelled from their land.

## Israel and Its All-Male Chieftains (3:7-31)

As the first of the judges is introduced, the narrator states that the Israelites did wrong in YHWH's eyes (Judg 3:7); furthermore, that "the Israelites again [Hebrew root אסף, 'to add'] did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (v. 12) will become a sort of refrain. Notice the contrast between the evil in YHWH's eyes and the right in everybody's own eyes as the book progresses toward kingship (Judg 17:6; 21:25). Reflecting this contrast, kingship will show the two sides of one coin. Perhaps the Israelites also saw the right in YHWH's eyes as wrong in their own eyes, so they turned to the Baals and Asherahs. I am not defending any party, just reflecting on how difficult this relationship is presented according to the book. If one adds the possibility of a historical origin during the Assyrian invasion of Israel, one gets a better picture: Israel was losing its grip on a land they felt had been given to them by YHWH; they turned to the local deities hoping to better their situation and everything went worse. War was everywhere, the (mainly male) leaders got it ever more wrong, the people were disoriented, and the women and children suffered the most, as in any war. And YHWH also suffered with these

attitudes. This context is important for the stories to be studied next, for this Israel, with a Deborah or an Othniel, but also with an Abimelech or a Samson, is not the Israel with weapons of mass destruction; rather, it is a small, impoverished people, who nevertheless want to survive and believe in the promises received.

*Othniel (3:7-11)*

Here we encounter once again the first hero, both the first in the row of local heroes about whom the central section of the book of Judges tells and the first one to be said to "judge"—govern; also bring justice to?—Israel (Judg 3:10). The verb שפט appeared in the book already five times in the theological overview in chapter 2. This verb will be used for several "judges" and is also used by Jephthah to invoke YHWH as "the Judge" between him and the Ammonites (Judg 11:27). It is used for the last time of Samson (Judg 16:31).

Othniel and his wife Achsah are so far the only individuals identified from the new generation, after Joshua and Caleb are gone from the story. (Caleb's death is not recorded; this is the common fate of women in the Bible, not of heroes!) Some aspects in the story of Othniel, as first judge, are confusing. Judges 1:12-15, for example, places Othniel around Hebron in the south of Judah, and then it shows him leading Israel in a war against king "Cushan-Double-Evil" of northern Mesopotamia. Is the Dtr thinking of a pan-Israelite state known to him at a much later time? Is it the exaggeration typical of taunt poetry and humorous stories? Or is it just the author's way to make Othniel the ideal judge, as most commentaries state? On other aspects, the information is precise in the sense that it adjusts to the Judges' cycle: YHWH raised Othniel to save Israel, YHWH's Spirit was on him, Othniel ruled for eight years, he went to war, he prevailed, the land rested, and Othniel died. A new cycle begins.

Serge Frolov notes that unlike other saviors, Othniel acts singlehandedly against a super-enemy.[44] In this text, Israel is never a subject but always an object of diverse actions from Cushan-Double-Evil (slavery), YHWH (pity, setting up a deliverer), and Othniel (deliverance, long rule over Israel, peace). One may suppose that when the narrator tells us that Othniel went to war, he was not alone, yet the focus is far from the people's army (perhaps because by the time of the Dtr, the army had

44. Serge Frolov, "Fire, Smoke, and Judah in Judges: A Response to Gregory Wong," *SJOT* 21 (2007): 129.

*Judges 3:7-11*

7The Israelites did what was evil in
the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord
their God, and worshiping the Baals and
the Asherahs. 8Therefore the anger of
the Lord was kindled against Israel,
and he sold them into the hand of King
Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim;
and the Israelites served Cushan-risha-
thaim eight years. 9But when the Isra-
elites cried out to the Lord, the Lord
raised up a deliverer for the Israelites,
who delivered them, Othniel son of
Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. 10The
spirit of the Lord came upon him, and
he judged Israel; he went out to war, and
the Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim
of Aram into his hand; and his hand pre-
vailed over Cushan-rishathaim. 11So the
land had rest forty years. Then Othniel
son of Kenaz died.

been professionalized and the people were not fighting their own battles anymore). The point I want to make is another, though, namely, that being acted upon, humiliated, subject to servitude, delivered, and so on are usually actions men take in the name of and for "their" women. Here patriarchy seems to be acting at its best, turning life on the land into a man's game between Double-Evil, Superhero, and YHWH. Would that be the model for future judges? Is this, precisely, the critique the author wants to bring home in an ironic way?

We will be watching for this clue regarding other deliverers as they will also take upon themselves killing their enemies singlehandedly, including Ehud, Jael, "a certain woman" who killed Abimelech with one deft stroke, Samson (who is also a loner), and Shamgar with the oxgoad; still later, David will kill Goliath likewise. So the question is, perhaps, whether it is a bad thing that a judge would kill the epitome of the enemy with no help from the army.

Schneider considers Othniel the model judge because of his military and family credentials, introduced earlier. Yet, neither his military ability nor his own lineage but his marriage is his major asset: "The reader knows he was not guilty of the crimes that caused the situation in the first place, intermarriage with the local inhabitants. Othniel was the only one who could bear this role since he was the only one whose background and marital relations are legitimate."[45] Something about this line of reasoning makes me uncomfortable. It is not Schneider's fault, but the text's underlying assumption is that (besides being considered in terms of compliance to the father's authority) women may be so easily

45. Schneider, *Judges*, 39.

divided by drawing a line between acceptable or unacceptable on the basis of men's exchange for marriage. I would like to emphasize not only Othniel's position as a bridge to the next generation but also Achsah's. For no man can establish a family on his own, much less a tribe. The book of Judges says nothing about whether they had children, although such a model male would have had at least a son. That Judges is more interested in the office than in the family life of a judge becomes evident when one gathers all the information about each judge.

To be highlighted are Othniel's military valor and his stable family life (ancestry, marriage, and no dynastic claims afterward), serving as foil especially to Abimelech, Jephthah, and Samson. Also, an argument out of silence is the fact that Othniel does not attribute his success to himself, for it was not his. McCann notes that mention of "rest" for the land starts with this judge's rule, continues with Ehud and Deborah, and it will not be mentioned again after the rule of Gideon.[46]

### *Ehud (3:12-30)*

The expression "did evil in YHWH's eyes" appears only four times in the Bible, all of them in Judges (3:12; 4:1; 10:6; 13:1). The author must have liked the phrase, for even though the evil was great, it was not unlike other periods in Israel's history.

The scenario for Ehud's action is the "city of Palms," identified with Jericho since the enemies are from around the vicinity. The deliverer will be a Benjaminite, literally "son of the right hand" (ימן), who is left-handed. The story has become very popular in recent years, with different degrees of humor identified. While some scholars take the name of the king of Moab, Eglon (from עגל, "calf"), and his description as ברי (full-fledged, sturdy, fat) to be that of an obese man ready to be slaughtered, others point out that calves are fit for sacrifice or to be worshiped; so, his description is not derogatory but points to a fit king, who has long been in the battlefield.[47] Ehud, therefore, will have to be very artful to overcome him!

Robert O'Connell identifies verbal imagery and temporal ordering as satiric devices to fool the king and his courtiers: a "double-mouthed" dagger hidden at Ehud's right thigh and double messages—"I bring the king an offering," "I have a secret message from YHWH"—and these are

46. J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 43.

47. See Lawson G. Stone, "Eglon's Belly and Ehud's Blade: A Reconsideration," *JBL* 128 (2009): 650–52, and Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*, 51.

*Judges 3:12-30*

12The Israelites again did what was
evil in the sight of the Lord; and the
Lord strengthened King Eglon of Moab
against Israel, because they had done
what was evil in the sight of the Lord.
13In alliance with the Ammonites and
the Amalekites, he went and defeated
Israel; and they took possession of the
city of palms. 14So the Israelites served
King Eglon of Moab eighteen years.

15But when the Israelites cried out to
the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a
deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Ben-
jaminite, a left-handed man. The Israel-
ites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of
Moab. 16Ehud made for himself a sword
with two edges, a cubit in length; and
he fastened it on his right thigh under
his clothes. 17Then he presented the
tribute to King Eglon of Moab. Now
Eglon was a very fat man. 18When
Ehud had finished presenting the trib-
ute, he sent the people who carried the
tribute on their way. 19But he himself
turned back at the sculptured stones
near Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret
message for you, O king." So the king
said, "Silence!" and all his attendants
went out from his presence. 20Ehud
came to him, while he was sitting alone
in his cool roof chamber, and said, "I
have a message from God for you."
So he rose from his seat. 21Then Ehud
reached with his left hand, took the
sword from his right thigh, and thrust
it into Eglon's belly; 22the hilt also went
in after the blade, and the fat closed
over the blade, for he did not draw the

Ehud's dagger in the king's lower belly.[48] A third device is the structuring of the story through chiasms with alternation of actions of "coming in" (the Moabite courtiers, Ehud, his dagger-hilt, the Moabite courtiers) and of "going out" (the Moabite courtiers, Eglon's excrement, and Ehud), mirroring another chiasm around "sending" and "saying" between the same actors; at both centers Eglon stands alone, surrounded by Ehud.[49] This is a well-crafted story, where form and content amuse and teach.

What makes the story so complex is the interrelation of several aspects, only one of which is sex; others are murder (regicide), the war environment, the socio-political oppression of the Midianites over the Israelites, and the ethnic component. For this is a story not about homosexuality but about the weapons a loner can use to deliver his people from a powerful king and fit soldier when YHWH decides this powerful king is no longer YHWH's instrument. Jack Sasson, on the other hand, argues

48. O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 85.

49. Michael L. Barré, "The Meaning of *pršdn* in Judges III 22," *VT* 41 (1991): 8–9; see also O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 89.

sword out of his belly; and the dirt came
out. [23]Then Ehud went out into the ves-
tibule, and closed the doors of the roof
chamber on him, and locked them.

[24]After he had gone, the servants
came. When they saw that the doors
of the roof chamber were locked, they
thought, "He must be relieving himself
in the cool chamber." [25]So they waited
until they were embarrassed. When
he still did not open the doors of the
roof chamber, they took the key and
opened them. There was their lord
lying dead on the floor.

[26]Ehud escaped while they delayed,
and passed beyond the sculptured
stones, and escaped to Seirah. [27]When
he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in
the hill country of Ephraim; and the Is-
raelites went down with him from the
hill country, having him at their head.
[28]He said to them, "Follow after me; for
the LORD has given your enemies the
Moabites into your hand." So they went
down after him, and seized the fords of
the Jordan against the Moabites and
allowed no one to cross over. [29]At that
time they killed about ten thousand of
the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied
men; no one escaped. [30]So Moab was
subdued that day under the hand of Is-
rael. And the land had rest eighty years.

that traditional readings, including rabbinic ones, looked at Eglon more positively and wondered at the regicide involved in this story. I appreciate Sasson's warning as to the literary genre and therefore message of the text, as well as new sexual readings of it.[50]

Is raping a person (man, woman, child, a person) a valid weapon in war, in torture camps, in prison?[51] Is anything valid when the enemy is powerful? For this is one of the story's presuppositions, that Eglon was much stronger than Ehud, just as Holofernes was much stronger than Judith, and Sisera than Jael (at least before Sisera's defeat in battle). I am aware that not every reader will see this sexual innuendo in Eglon's assassination, yet it is within the hermeneutical range of meaning (and, unfortunately, it is not the only violent text we have to deal with in the Bible).

50. Jack M. Sasson, "Ethically Cultured Interpretations: The Case of Eglon's Murder (Judges 3)," in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded*, ed. Gershon Galil, Mark Geller, and Alan Millard (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 571–73, 589–92. He takes issue particularly with Robert Alter and T. A. Jull on their sexual and scatological readings of the story, as well as on ascribing it to the satirical genre (he recognized humorous aspects, but within a narrative, not a satire).

51. See Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 157–59.

## TRANSLATION MATTERS

Deryn Guest observes that "three elements of Ehud's characterization suggest that his assassination of Eglon is meant to be read figuratively as a male rape scene: the emphasis upon his left-handedness, the several references to his 'hand,' and his Benjaminite affiliation."[52] That the left hand had a lesser value than the right one does not need a long explanation (think of the pair right-left, always in that order in the Bible; of ancient and modern cultures where the left hand is related to the "untoward," or of the connotations of "leftist" and "sinister"). When we imagine Ehud from an elite group of commandos, however, possibly ambidextrous, his left-handedness becomes one more weapon, and in a story like this one that is not to be discredited.[53] The second hint is the use of "hand" as a euphemism for the genitals and the cubit-long dagger hanging next to his thigh. Finally, his Benjaminite affiliation would point to the homoerotic relationship that later Saul and Jonathan (Benjamities) had with David. To these elements one may add the use of ambiguous vocabulary ("come into," "secret or hidden thing," "belly or womb," and "covering of the feet"), the inner organs closing around the stuck phallus-like dagger, the upper room's location where both men are alone, the discomfort of the king's courtiers to interrupt—and the use of rape as a way to emasculate an enemy, especially in war milieus.[54]

> In conclusion, it becomes clear that the Moabites, who are all described as "fat" men at the close of the story (3.29), are the butt of a narrative loaded with ethnic humour and scathing satire. The sexual slur reinforces the generally hostile and racist presentation of the Moabites. . . . The narrator uses sexual practice to create boundaries between self and other. Bailey (1995) in particular demonstrates how foreigners, as the "out-group," are often distinguished on the basis of their practice of taboo sexual acts. . . . Here, in Judges 3, sexual language, imagery, and *double entendre* are graphically used in order to ridicule and discredit such foreigners and to legitimize their oppression.[55]

Guest pushes for the inclusion of such a story among the texts of terror for gay men, noting YHWH's condoning position. But even worse,

> The text assumes that to be caricatured as a passive recipient of anal rape is one of the most derogatory insults that one can direct towards a person/group. The text thus requires a shared contempt for any man who is penetrated by another and for the act itself. It also assumes that people like Eglon *deserve* to be violated/eliminated from society.[56]

52. Deryn Guest, "Judges," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Shore-Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM, 2006), 167–89, at 168.

53. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 147–48.

54. See Guest, "Judges," 168–77, and Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 160–64.

55. Guest, "Judges," 173. Emphasis in original.

56. Ibid., 176–77.

### *Gay Hate Crime or Justified Act of Liberation? The Story of Judge Ehud and King Eglon (Judg 3:12-30)*

Ehud, "a social bandit,"[57] is more traditionally recognized as an important "judge" who saves the Israelites from Moabite oppression. However, his characterization as a Benjaminite and a left-handed warrior and the repeated references to his "hand" encourage some interpreters to view the entire episode as a "deliberately scripted figurative rape scene."[58] It tells of Ehud and the king of Moab, Eglon, entangling in a homoerotic and sexually violent encounter that ends in the bloody murder of the king.

Sometimes interpreters point to the link in the narrative between sexually-erotic allusions, on the one hand, and aggressive-combative references, on the other hand. To them, the short blade in verse 16 is a phallic image, and the reference to the king's body size in verse 17 is a feminizing attribute; these combine in a vaginal image when the sword disappears in the belly fat of the king in verse 22, especially since the noun for belly means "womb" in the original Hebrew text. In other words, Eglon performs in the position of a woman who is penetrated and passive. He is feminized and hence not so subtly ridiculed.

The sexual insinuations also include the location of the sexually murderous encounter, which is ambiguously described and thus variously translated. Some believe that verse 23 refers to a balcony or a cool, upstairs room. Others suggest the location must be imagined as a royal toilet room, a locked, private space where Eglon went alone. There the king stands with his pants down, and Ehud performs in this "male-male sexual innuendo,"[59] killing the king in the end.

The ethnic-racist humor is part of this male-on-male sexually violent depiction. The Israelite audience, the addressee of the narrative, knows who the "bad boys" are: the Moabites. They are feminized, sexualized, dehumanized, and hence discredited as foreigners, the others, who deserve contempt, ridicule, sexual violence, and even murder. Nobody wants to be on the Moabite side, because the Moabites are the oppressors of Israel. In short, the sexualized representation of the Moabite king goes hand in hand with the ethnic denigration of the entire nation, taking the penetrated role of a woman in verse 30, when this time not only Ehud's but all of Israel's "hand" subdues Moab.

57. Niditch, *Judges*, 55.
58. Guest, "Judges," 170.
59. Ibid., 173.

And again, ignoring the sexually violent imagery, interpreters have sided readily with the victorious Israelites.

When Judges 3:12-30 is read this way, the story of Ehud the judge turns into a highly uncomfortable and shocking "text of terror for gay-identified readers."[60] The narrative exonerates quickly the assailant and murderer, as well as the conquering Israelites who killed ten thousand Moabite males, "all strong, able-bodied men," and then the Israelites lived in peace for the next eighty years (3:30). The male-on-male rape story culminates in the assassination of the oppressive king. It also plays with feminizing metaphors, inviting the warmongering killing of the enemy in the readers' minds, even though initially it is God who "strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel" (3:12). But perhaps only a later editor, who attempted to justify the murder, added this argument to the story. Or is the imagined revenge of a people against its former oppressor acceptable after all, especially when it relies on images of hate crime?[61]

*Susanne Scholz*

There are no women present in this story: where are Eglon's mother, wife (wives), daughter(s)? Are there no women at Eglon's court? Being a seasoned commander, was his rather a fortress than a palace? Perhaps the notable absence of women here is one reason to have a left-handed Benjaminite violate/kill the commander and become a bit effeminate. Like Judith, Ehud risked his life coming into the enemy's quarters (to its most private areas) and killing the mighty ruler to deliver Israel; unlike Judith, the powerful is not infatuated by Ehud's beauty or attire, but falls for "a secret thing/word from Elohim/deity" (is he naïve or religious?).[62]

The discussion on Eglon's intestines, and even on Ehud's dagger, would be different if there were no implicit idea that rape of a male means his feminization. Rape itself is bad enough, and having been stabbed and deftly killed should be bad enough as well. It all boils down to the problem of taking a particular action as feminine. From the moment anything hard, phallus-like, penetrates something, that "some-

60. Ibid., 176.

61. Susanne Scholz, "Judges," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 113–27, here 117.

62. Schneider, *Judges*, 51.

thing" is feminized—the land, a person—which is to say, put in the inferior position of the hierarchical binary pair as passive, possessed, to be taken. "Although both males and females in the Bible may behave as tricksters, gender ideology still functions in their respective presentation, as it must; and this gender differentiation may cut both ways."[63]

The end of the story is not one man's assassination but the killing of ten thousand seasoned warriors at the hands of Israel, whose victory is from YHWH (Judg 3:28), and peace on the land for eighty years. This would have meant peace for two generations; peace that would have allowed families to plant, to build up, to have children and grandchildren, fearing no external threat.

### *Shamgar ben-Anath (Judg 3:31)*

This is the shortest notice about a deliverer. In one verse we learn the order in which he came (after Ehud), his name, enemies, his weapon, and a validation: "He too delivered Israel."

Compare this information with that from any other "judge" and you will notice how much we are missing. Adrianus van Selms describes him as "isolated" even though "he *also* delivered Israel."[64] According to most studies, Shamgar's name is not Israelite but indigenous (Hurrian or Canaanite); since there is no tribal reference either, there is no intention to "Israelitize" him. Nevertheless, Shamgar might have come from Beth-Anath in Galilee, or, in parallel to Barak ben Abinoam, Anath might have been his father's name, coming from the Hebrew root ענה, to answer.[65] Other facts, however, would point to an explicit connection to the popular Canaanite goddess of war, consort of Baal, who "embodies the tensions and paradoxes of feminine power in an androcentric world. She disdains feminine social roles and domestic responsibility, and engages in the masculine activities of hunting, warfare, and politics," as Schneider reminds us. Since these are also Deborah's and Jael's characteristics, inclusion of Shamgar before these women is, according to

63. Athalya Brenner, "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who's Afraid of Biblical Humour? The Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler in the Hebrew Bible," *JSOT* 63 (1994): 47.

64. Adrianus van Selms, "Judge Shamgar," *VT* 14 (1964): 296.

65. Thus Thomas F. McDaniel, *The Song of Deborah: Poetry in Dialect; A Philological Study of Judges 5 with Translation and Commentary* (2003), 45–60, http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/.

*Judges 3:31*

[31]After him came Shamgar son of Anath, who killed six hundred of the Philistines with an oxgoad. He too delivered Israel.

Schneider, "a foreshadowing which prepares the reader for other women who engaged in warfare and politics and were not controlled by clear male authority."[66] Another scholar, Susan Ackerman, affirms that "the Israelite authors responsible for Judges 5 . . . derived their portrayal of Deborah as a female military hero in the battle against Sisera from older Canaanite paradigms of Anat, the warrior goddess."[67]

Shamgar ben-Anath appears in association with Jael in the song of Deborah, in reference to a time long past that of the poet (Judg 5:6), in which insecurity was so widespread that caravans had stopped running. What exactly Shamgar did is subject to speculation, but the general idea is clear: he used an agricultural tool to repel a battalion of Philistines. If there is any historical truth behind him, Shamgar probably was a peasant who either fought alone or, more probably, lead a guerrilla-like battle against a group of Philistines. Like Jael and Samson, he did not use professional, military weapons but rather the tools with which he lived every day.

Schneider wonders whether the trend is to praise the participation of a non-Israelite or to take it as "the decline of the leaders that Israel relied upon for help."[68] It is easy to forget, with the narrator's constant use of "the Israelites," that there is no Israel as such; it is "in the making," so to speak. The first hero was a Kenizzite even though Judah was supposed to lead the tribes. Soon after, Jael, another non-Israelite, will deal the death blow to the powerful commander Sisera. Is "Israel" an allegiance to a socio-political egalitarian program with faithfulness to its "designer"/promoter YHWH, rather than an ethnic characteristic? While Shamgar is not absorbed into Israel through marriage or genealogy (unless Anath was his Israelite father, which is far from clear), he is given the third place among Israel's deliverers. In my opinion, the text leaves to the audience an evaluation of him as positive or flawed.

66. Schneider, *Judges*, 56; also referring to Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth*.
67. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 58.
68. Schneider, *Judges*, 56.

# Judges 4:1–5:31

## *Deborah: A Female Prophet Who Judged Israel*

Chapters 4 and 5 are two versions of one story involving a female prophet and judge (Deborah), a female tent-dweller and assassin (Jael), a male commander of YHWH's troops (Barak), and a Canaanite king (Jabin) with his general (Sisera). While no story is complete in itself, the danger is to make a mosaic out of both and erase their differences.[1] One of these differences is the role each character is ascribed. Another is the genre of each chapter: Judges 4 is a narrative while chapter 5 is a song. Some contradictions remain, but for the readers who come to Judges after Joshua, these would not be unusual; there are reasons for these divergences, which we will not solve here. One

1. There is no consensus as to their history of redaction and mutual influence and at this point I would not press for one position, although I tend to consider the song as older than the narrative. Athalya Brenner, "A Triangle and a Rhombus in Narrative Structure: A Proposed Integrative Reading of Judges IV and V," *VT* 40 (1990): 137, sees them so complementing each other that "they may have been composed, or at least circulated, almost concurrently, and may have enjoyed a similar degree of authority." Since every text has been edited and set within a larger, later story, this is a discussion that does not bring much fruit at this point of scholarship. A helpful comparison of both stories may be found in Renate Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht in der Anthropologie des Richterbuches* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), 143–61.

might dwell on them or take them, in the best of rabbinic tradition, as complementary to each other.

The prose account begins and concludes with a woman, Deborah and Jael, respectively, talking to Barak, and it elaborates on Sisera's demise. The song evokes war without describing it: cosmic powers, waters as YHWH's agents, the Divine Warrior fighting for the people, Deborah and Barak uttering battle songs, and Sisera's mother, who is never mentioned in chapter 4, imagining spoil being taken. Whether there is fact behind these stories is very hard to say and even harder to retrieve. The event is located at the Jezreel valley, where some powerful cities stood (names such as Hazor and Megiddo are mentioned). YHWH moved, however, from a mountain to the battleground and showed otherworldly power. This move signals the perception of Israel's deity as one who accompanies the little farmers and seminomadic ("Israelite") groups against the fortified, well-defended, oppressive cities. To have been able to rise up against such a mammoth power and prevail deserved, no doubt, to be kept in songs of praise to YHWH and mockery of the powerful kings. It is likely that a real event, some unexpected victory, happened at some point and is the core of the story.

According to Robert O'Connell, there are three plot levels within this narrative, with plot A covering 4:1–5:31: "Yhwh's deliverance of Israel from Jabin's military domination by the word of his prophetess Deborah (4:1-7 [8] 9-10a, 12-15a [15b] 16 [17a, 18-20] 21, 23-24; 5:31b)."[2] Two other plots, relating to Deborah's limitation of Barak's glory (4:8-9, 10b, [14a, 15a], 15b-16, 17a, 21-22) and to a woman's glorification as achiever of YHWH's plan (4:9a, 11, 17-22), have been intertwined so that there are, as in any good story, complications and suspense. Considering the three plots, O'Connell presents the protagonists as a team, Deborah/Barak/Jael. His proposal posits a conflict of interests: the only time that we have a woman with impeccable credentials for the post, we get a good team to overshadow her. Is this another patriarchal trick or is it, rather, a new way of doing leadership? A woman who does not win her post in a battle (even though there is also no record of her having received YHWH's Spirit), a woman who, like Moses, got her credentials both from YHWH and from the people (4:5) could have worked alone? We learn from Moses' father-in-law that good leadership involves delegation (Exod 18:13-27) and, from a hermeneutical perspective, we cannot get enough teamwork models to inspire us. All these matters considered, I

2. Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 103; see also 104.

keep seeing Deborah as the main character because she is the only one said to "judge" over Israel, because by having judged Israel before she was in any armed conflict she provides a different model from other judges (more of the type of the mediator than the ruler or warrior), and because she is given the title of prophetess (and, in the following chapter, also called a mother in Israel). Prophecy was a common phenomenon in the ancient Near East long before Israel came into existence, and thus it did not require a job description. Furthermore, already the first human action after leaving slavery in Egypt was a thanksgiving song led, as our song in chapter 5, by a woman (Miriam the prophet [and Moses]). "Israelite prophets served a highly political function, declaring God's word for a specific time and place. They appear to have had defined functions in premonarchical Israel's wars, declaring whether or not God would give the tribes victory."[3] Here, Linda Dietch's comment on Gideon's narrative is very applicable: "By and large the characters in Judges appear to consider Yhwh their war god, whom they call upon during times of international and intertribal strife. His [*sic*] role within the judgeship narratives, which focus primarily on violent upheavals within the social order, seems only to endorse this assumption."[4]

## Deborah's Prophecy and Summons to Barak (4:1-16)

Chapter 4 starts by indicating the already known dynamics of Israel's unfaithfulness toward YHWH and its consequent oppression by Hazor's king, Jabin. The size of his army (as well as extrabiblical evidence on the city of Hazor) speaks of his power, especially in contrast to the Israelite tribes of the north-central region. Suddenly, in verse 4 Deborah (a term that in Hebrew means "the bee") is introduced first by proper name, then by

3. Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 155. See Esther J. Hamori, *Women's Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Wilda Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Irmtraud Fischer, *Gotteskünderinnen: Zu einer geschlechterfairen Deutung der Prophetie in der Hebräischen Bibel* (Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 2002); Klara Butting, *Prophetinnen gefragt: Die Bedeutung der Prophetinnen im Kanon aus Tora und Prophetie*, Erev-Rav-Hefte: Biblisch-feministische Texte 3 (Wittingen: Erev-Rav, 2001).

4. Linda A. Dietch, *Authority and Violence in the Gideon and Abimelech Narratives: A Sociological and Literary Exploration of Judges 6–9*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 75 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 60. A similar statement is offered by Ronald E. Clements, "The Community of God in the Hebrew Bible," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Leo G. Perdue (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 282.

*Judges 4:1-16*

4:1The Israelites again did what was
evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud
died. 2So the Lord sold them into the
hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who
reigned in Hazor; the commander of
his army was Sisera, who lived in Ha-
rosheth-ha-goiim. 3Then the Israelites
cried out to the Lord for help; for he
had nine hundred chariots of iron, and
had oppressed the Israelites cruelly
twenty years.

4At that time Deborah, a prophet-
ess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging
Israel. 5She used to sit under the palm
of Debora between Ramah and Bethel
in the hill country of Ephraim; and the
Israelites came up to her for judgment.

6She sent and summoned Barak son of
Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and
said to him, "The Lord, the God of Is-
rael commands you, 'Go, take position
at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand
from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe
of Zebulun. 7I will draw out Sisera, the
general of Jabin's army to meet you by
the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and
his troops; and I will give him into your
hand.'" 8Barak said to her, "If you will go
with me, I will go; but if you will not go
with me, I will not go." 9And she said,
"I will surely go with you; nevertheless,
the road on which you are going will
not lead to your glory, for the Lord will
sell Sisera into the hand of a woman."

office, "a prophesying woman" or "a woman/female prophet," and then (depending on the translation chosen) by her marital status (most translations take her as "Lappidoth's wife") or by a personal characteristic, "a fiery woman."[5] Finally, verses 4-5 indicate her relationship to her people: she was judging Israel at that time, sitting/presiding under Deborah's palm tree.

In reference to the other Deborah in the Bible (Gen 35:8), Schneider notes how striking it is "that the only women for whom trees were named bore the same name."[6] Deborah is invested with the authority of speaking in YHWH's name and with the same authority of Moses in judiciary matters. This is an impressive task, even if we are not given a glimpse

5. Tammi Schneider, *Judges: A Commentary*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 63–64, indicates that with *debôrâ* starts a string of seven feminine nouns.

6. Schneider, *Judges*, 69. The only reference I have found to their association to a tree comes from Gary Greenberg, "Neith and the Two Biblical Deborahs: One and the Same," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt (Atlanta, 1995), 6, http://ggreenberg.tripod.com/writings/w-neith-deb.htm, mentioning the Egyptian Bee Goddess Neith, associated also with torches, motherhood, and deities' struggles. On the first Deborah as precursor of the one in Judges, see Funlola O. Olojede, "Unsung Heroines of the Hebrew Bible: A Contextual Theological Reading from the Perspective of Woman Wisdom" (PhD diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2011) and "The 'First Deborah'—Genesis 35:8 in the Literary and Theological Context," *Acta Theologica* 36, no. 1 (2016): 133–51.

Then Deborah got up and went with
Barak to Kedesh. [10]Barak summoned
Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and
ten thousand warriors went up behind
him; and Deborah went up with him.

[11]Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh.

[12]When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, [13]Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon.

[14]Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him. [15]And the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot; [16]while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.

of her calling or mention of YHWH's Spirit coming upon her. And there are no negative traits in her, such as making an ephod, doubting God's power, or taking personal vengeance on her enemies.

Schneider notes that, while in Joshua the kings are active in warring against the Israelites, in Judges "the king, if he existed at all, was overshadowed by both his general and even the general's mother. The king did not take counsel with other kings as he did in the time of Joshua but the general's mother took counsel with her counselors (Judg 5:29). The contrast is particularly marked in this chapter where both Israel's commander and the person who kills the foreign leader were women."[7] A possible explanation comes from Athalya Brenner, who shows that chapter 4 works on pairs, such as the "champions of Israel" and the "antagonists" or "defeated Canaanites." A third pair of characters, forming the triangle, is that of YHWH and Jael.[8] King Jabin, YHWH, and Deborah are rather passive, being each the "social, political, or religious initiator of the action" carried on by a military seconder: Deborah instructs Barak, Jabin has the general Sisera, and YHWH acts through Jael. Barak's relationship to Deborah is not spelled out, but mutual knowledge seems to be taken for granted. To Deborah's words of assurance that despite the difference in power between both armies (a professional army with chariots and

7. Schneider, *Judges*, 60.
8. Brenner, "A Triangle and a Rhombus," 130–31.

infantry against a militia comprised of men called on from some tribes) theirs will be the victory, for YHWH will give Sisera in their hands, Barak's words to Deborah are surprising: "I will go only if you come with me" (v. 8). These words may be variously interpreted, and a perusal of various commentaries shows this variety: Doubt at her word or authority? Fear? Need to have an expert in oracles who would indicate the exact moment to come down against the Canaanites? Teamwork? The only hint comes from Deborah's answer, which may, again, be variously interpreted: "I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (v. 9). Is that a warning (if that is what you want, all right, however, be warned that . . .), a deepening of her prophetic message (there is more to it: YHWH has chosen a woman to carry on this plan), or a gendered punishment for his doubts (since you doubt this woman's word, a woman will take away the glory for this battle)? We are told nothing else. Since her first depiction is as a woman prophet, her words are a prophetic utterance and, in that sense, Jael is also Deborah's hand, the one to realize Deborah's prophecy.[9] Deborah is not mentioned again in this chapter. The developments that follow, however, confirm her prophetic words of God's deliverance and Barak's good sense in having followed her lead.

What to make of the fact that Barak's wanting to be accompanied by a woman results in that woman taking his honor? Is it a punishment? It is insulting. Yet, it reflects the Bible's and our societies' lower expectations of a woman than a man. Deborah's words imply that the honor of taking the enemy's life should be Barak's and otherwise any other man's, not a woman's, as will be also corroborated by Abimelech's preoccupation not to be remembered in history as being felled by a woman. Fortunately he *is* remembered as killed by a woman with a woman's tool, and that event is, as Jael's, assessed by the book of Judges as YHWH's doing by the hand of a woman (see 9:53-55). It also matches the gendered division of society, ascribing the military realm to men and the domestic one to women. This is an example of a M(asculine) voice using a F(eminine)—and not any woman, a prophet—to advance the androcentric agenda; Deborah is testifying against herself and all other women.[10] A more positive view, however, is possible. On the one hand, Barry Webb, for instance, considers it Barak's "punishment for trying to manipulate

9. Elie Assis, "'The Hand of a Woman': Deborah and Jael (Judges 4)," *JHS* 5, art. 19 (2005): 3–4, at http://www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_49.pdf.

10. See a summary of several positions on this question in Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 143–49.

Deborah, Yahweh's prophet. It is also a foretaste of a far greater evil that Jephthah will bring upon himself by trying to manipulate Yahweh directly."[11] This is a perspective that focuses not on a female's glory as punishment for Barak's doubts but on one of YHWH's servants being manipulated by another of YHWH's servants.

**TRANSLATION MATTERS: DEBORAH, אשת חבר לפידות**

Deborah is introduced in 4:4 as a female, a prophet (or a woman prophesying, there is no grammatical need for a second noun, "woman"), the "woman of" לפידות, *lappîdôt* (a plural feminine name meaning "torches"). Translations (including NRSV) take לפידות as a personal noun and thus translate "wife of Lappidoth"; however, it is somewhat suspect because it is unique as a name in the Bible (and there is no patronymic for him either: Lappidoth from which family or tribe?). It may have been a nickname.[12]

Other translations are syntactically equally possible. Far-fetched from what we know from traditional societies but still grammatically possible, Lappidoth could be understood as a personal feminine name, thus indicating a lesbian couple. There is another possible translation. The Hebrew uses few adjectives, so often two nouns in a genitive relationship ("woman of torches") would imply "a fiery woman" or "woman of spirit." Tammi Schneider points out that Othniel and Ehud were also introduced together with their primary relationships (son of/tribe of) followed by a personal quality (younger brother, restricted in his right hand). Deborah's first relationships are to her ministry as a female prophet. Thus, it would be unlikely that her third characteristic would be her relation to a husband, which should come first, before woman and prophet.[13] Carolyn Pressler notes that "the storyteller's audience would have heard both meanings and would have enjoyed the play on words identifying independent, spirit-filled Deborah."[14]

A hermeneutical contortion enables us to twist the "natural" explanation (that a woman is no match for a general) and state that for YHWH it does not matter whether it is a man or a woman, a countryman turned army leader or a female prophet (so far in the story, we have not been introduced to Jael), for there are other weapons besides chariots. Barak accepts Deborah's word and comes down with Deborah against Sisera—and Sisera comes down from his chariot to flee (v. 15). He leaves his troops on their own (v. 16) and runs toward a hiding place. King Jabin and his hand, Sisera, have failed miserably. What about the third pair of

11. Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 186.
12. Schneider, *Judges*, 66.
13. Schneider, *Judges*, 67.
14. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 155.

characters identified by Brenner? There is no record of the type "YHWH ordered Jael," and therefore scholars assign all kinds of intentions to her (see below). What we can say from this triple (or triangular, in Brenner's proposal) arrangement of characters is that two out of the three "military seconders" managed their mission, while the professional killer failed. Of course, this was YHWH's doing, working through human hands.

Barak is intriguing as a man who does not act as "patriarchalized" or androcentric. He is introduced as Barak ben-Abinoam, which means "'Flash, the son of a delightful father.' However, Barak is not identified as a warrior or a military commander and his combat experience is unknown. Barak's tribe, Naphtali, also lacks a reputation for military success: it is unable to drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and Beth-anath; it co-exists with the Canaanites and employs them to work in its vineyards (Judg. 1.33)."[15] Perhaps that Naphtalite experience, even if humiliating from the masculine point of view of keeping honor through military success, determined Barak's approach as a team worker. If this is so, then we need not see his words to Deborah as doubtful of her leadership as judge; on the contrary.[16]

The narrative puts Jael in control of both Sisera and Barak by using very similar expressions in her successive actions toward them and by laughing also at Barak, who continues his persecution of Sisera while he is already dead.[17] The primary reason for these devices is that the main character of the story is Deborah, for she is a prophet. Here, we have a conflict of interests, for men are trained to be honored and seek honor (fighting and bragging), while women are socialized to be humble, submit, and yield. True prophets, however, contended that no man (or woman) was to get the glory that belongs only to God. In this sense, it does not matter whether it is Miriam, Deborah, or Isaiah: the glory belongs to God. God may decide to honor any mortal; in fact, Jael is called most blessed of women, and the end of the poem invokes doom on enemies and blessings on those who love YHWH: "So perish all your enemies, O Lord! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might" (5:31). Gender or social position do not have the last word when it comes to YHWH's plans.

Speaking of YHWH's plans, we come to the hands that will deal Sisera his deadly blow.

15. Roger Ryan, *Judges*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 27.

16. See also Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 82–93 on Deborah's role as a prophet.

17. Assis, "'The Hand of A Woman,'" 20–22.

## Jael, the Woman Who Dwelled in Tents (4:17-22)

The battle is over, Sisera is fleeing on foot, and Barak is following him as all Canaanite soldiers have fallen by the sword. Sisera seeks refuge at the Kenite camp, assuming that he will be safe there. The first reason given is that the Kenites were in a friendly relationship with King Jabin, probably doing the metallurgic work for him. A nonaligned group may not, however, be an ally. "Unfortunately for Sisera, only Mrs. Heber is at home," comments Roger Ryan.[18] Mrs. Heber or a woman from the company of the Kenites (see "Translation Matters" box) is much more than a wife in this story, a story that "cannot reach its dénouement now until Sisera is accounted for. That dénouement is reached with the ironic juxtaposition of victor and vanquished in the tent of Jael, the woman who has in effect conquered them both: Sisera by depriving him of his life, and Barak by depriving him of the honor that should have been his as the chosen deliverer."[19]

In this passage the name of Jael (meaning "ibex," a local goat) is given and there is a reference to her tent, which may reflect what Sisera saw first, or her Kenite or religious character (see 5:24). Is she an Israelite married to a Kenite or is she a Kenite, whose marital status is unstated?

Jael comes out to greet Sisera and invites him with words that must have sounded like home to his ears: סורה אדוני סורה, "turn (here) my lord" (v. 18). The similar sounds of the imperative and his name are notable.[20] I wonder if being called "lord" after such a humiliating defeat was not even more alluring to him than a sound similar to his name. Be that as it may, Sisera enters her tent, asks for water, drinks milk, orders her to watch over the entrance, and falls asleep (vv. 19-20). He will never awake, for Jael will come to him (again the same verb, בוא) and thrust the peg through his temple. When Barak finally arrives pursuing Sisera, he will be invited to come into her tent and recognize that Deborah's words have become true. Once again the expression בוא אל is used in order to create a pattern in Jael's actions toward both men.

18. Ryan, *Judges*, 28.

19. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 184.

20. Furthermore, the motif of a dangerous woman coming out to invite an unsuspecting man into her room, eventuating in "death," is strong in Prov 7:6-27. The motif could be playing a role here, although there are differences between both settings, e.g., the city and not the field, death as a figure for adultery and its consequences, the vow motif in her speech, absent here, and, more telling, this is not an unsuspecting youngster ("my son") who is being taught facts of adult life. See also Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 29–31.

*Judges 4:17-22*

17Now Sisera had fled away on foot
to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the
Kenite; for there was peace between
King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of
Heber the Kenite. 18Jael came out to
meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn
aside my lord, turn aside to me; have no
fear." So he turned aside to her into the
tent, and she covered him with a rug.
19Then he said to her, "Please give me
a little water to drink; for I am thirsty."
So she opened a skin of milk and gave
him a drink and covered him. 20He said
to her, "Stand by at the entrance of the
tent, and if anybody comes and asks
you, 'Is anyone here?' say 'No.'" 21But
Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and
took a hammer in her hand, and went
softly to him and drove the peg into
his temple, until it went down into the
ground—he was lying fast asleep from
weariness—and he died. 22Then, as
Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael
went out to meet him, and said to him,
"Come, and I will show you the man
whom you are seeking." So he went
into her tent; and there was Sisera lying
dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

**TRANSLATION MATTERS: JAEL, אשת חבר הקיני**

Jael appears only in Judges 4:17-22 and 5:6, 24-27. Judges 5:6 alludes to her in parallel to Shamgar. In 5:24 she is called most blessed of tent women, and the song repeats the phrase that describes her in 4:17, אשת חבר הקיני. While "the wife of Heber the Kenite" is the common understanding of the phrase, חבר also means "group of, band" (see Hos 6:9). Thus, the phrase may also mean "a woman of the group of the Kenites."[21]

Barry Webb notes the mastery of the authors in depicting Jael by using expressions very similar to those in the account of Ehud's killing of Eglon (3:15-23). Both Jael and Ehud meet their foes alone in a private space and kill someone who appears to be an unsuspecting man who is Israel's oppressor. In both stories a man, or a group of men, discovers the assassination.[22] Another common element between both saviors is the phallic connotation of the mortal element, which is handled, as Deryn Guest notes, in the left hand. Given the euphemistic use of "hand," יד, for

21. Baruch Halpern, "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography," *HTR* 76 (1983): 393–94. Lillian Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 37, thinks she is a very independent Israelite married to a Kenite.

22. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 184.

penis, she notes further that Jael, a woman with a penis, is "not-woman-not-man," a person for whom no pronoun fits, a person who defies established gender categories but joins the ranks of the "queer."[23] Perhaps this gender ambiguity is hinted at also in Sisera's address to Jael. In 4:19, Sisera humbly asks Jael for a little water, using the imperative feminine (השקיני־נא) plus a particle of entreaty, while after drinking he commands Jael to stand to watch over his sleep, using the masculine imperative (עמד, v. 20). Is the text mimicking a general stereotyping: when the issue is to be nurtured by a woman, you use polite language, but when the issue is to be a lifeguard, you command a man? Queer biblical scholars pick it up as a positive clue, rather than explaining it away: "There are so few instances where such gender queerness comes clearly to the surface that it is important not to relapse readily into the simultaneous imaging of Jael as seductive tent-dwelling woman, *especially* when that female gender status is allowed to overcome something that is thereby reduced to a momentary 'figuration.'"[24] Deryn Guest's approach is important because it "constitutes a classical refutation of the common heterosexist myth that the Bible consistently presents God as creating and approving of only two genders," explains Thomas Hanks.[25] (See above, pp. 12–13, where Hanks explores sexual relationships beyond heterosexual marriage.) In my opinion, what is most interesting about Jael is not so much that she is out of her gender prescription but that she assumes several. For a woman to dwell alone in a tent, to invite a male into her tent may be gender-bending (and we are not told how she was dressed, perhaps there would be some other clue there). But, on the other hand, to act surprisingly and use what she has at hand is very much "gender appropriate": men are supposed to fight on the battlefield, and people who do not hold power (e.g., women) are deceptive when it comes to confronting physical might and outright power.[26] Sisera should have defined his and Barak's destinies on the battlefield instead of leaving

23. Deryn Guest, "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 27. Emphasis in original.

24. Ibid., 23. Schneider, *Judges*, 80, takes Sisera's lapse as a sign of "how comfortable and unsuspecting he was."

25. Thomas Hanks, "Judges: Anarchy Unmasked," in *Subversive Hebrew Bible*, 10, http://www.fundotrasovejas.org.ar/ingles/Libros/Subersibe%20hebrew%20bible/Judges.pdf.

26. See Gale A. Yee, "Recovering Marginalized Groups," in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney*, ed. Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 13–15.

his army and fleeing; Sisera, not Deborah or Jael, has assumed a role traditionally disparaged by men!

Whether as "not-woman-not-man," as a married woman, or as a priestess, erotic and maternal overtones have been detected in the encounter between Jael and Sisera. Jael can be seen as maternal as she nourishes Sisera, offering him a richer beverage than asked for, covering him and putting him to sleep, and even, in a parodic maternal gesture, "giving birth to dead Sisera."[27] From another angle, Susan Niditch notes the play of erotic and deadly associations in the use of רגליה, "her feet/legs" (used euphemistically in several texts) and in the phallic shape of the instrument used, so that "the defeated soldier is the woman, the one subdued, raped, and made love to."[28] Finally, Lillian Klein is one of the few scholars who states there was a sexual encounter between Sisera and Jael, which renders him exhausted: "I suggest that Jael has used her feminine wiles to entice and seduce Sisera in order to put him to sleep and that she gave him curd instead of water in order to deepen that sleep."[29] I wonder whether a man who has lost his army, his chariotry, the battle, and is fleeing for his life is ready for sex. Committing adultery (if indeed Jael was married) would not have been easily condoned, and yet, by using whatever weapons she had at hand, Jael allured Sisera and got the reward of being called the most blessed among female tent-dwellers. "It would seem that a man could trust a woman with whom he has just had sexual intercourse to protect him. Men do not expect a woman to use a man as some men may use women, to their own advantage."[30]

Still, many commentators have serious qualms about Jael's ways and regard both her seduction of Sisera and her cold assassination as a dirty game.[31] They see her as seducer, deceiver, and killer—yet, the Bible has nothing but praise for her. Not only that: O'Connell notes that her plot is the only one with no complications in Judges 4–5, indicating that YHWH

27. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzählte Welten im Richterbuch*, BibInt 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 100. Also J. Cheryl Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," in *Judges and Method*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 71–72, detects male anxiety toward mothers, who can offer their boys protection and suddenly turn into assassins.

28. Susan Niditch, "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 50.

29. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 38.

30. Ibid., 38.

31. It should be noted also that Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 186, and Schneider, *Judges*, 76, among other scholars consider Jael, rather than Deborah, the true heroine of this cycle.

was behind it/her.[32] His assessment corroborates from the structural point of view Brenner's contention that Jael is YHWH's agent, as Sisera is Jabin's and Barak is Deborah's. Were her actions to be seen as treacherous or doubtful by the authors, the writers would not have let the opportunity pass by and would have indicated, however subtly, their discomfort with her. But, on the contrary, she is most blessed among women (at least among women living in tents) and she is also paired to Shamgar (5:6). Thus, interpreters would do well in restricting moralistic views alien to the text and try to understand how it is that she is depicted so positively.

The question that lingers in the air is to whom will Jael be loyal, especially in a scenario in which neither Jabin nor Heber (if we take Heber to be her husband) is present.[33] Whether married or single, female or transgender, Jael's Kenite group stood between their recent alliance with Jabin and their long-standing association with the Israelites through Moses' father-in-law. Thus, Jael alone has to solve this conflict of loyalties, which affects the whole company of Kenites. Just as Shamgar used an oxgoad, Jael uses whatever is at her hand.

**Resolviendo:** ***Reading Jael's Story from the Cuban Perspective of Survival***

*Introduction*

The last two decades of Cuban history present the clearest picture of how Cubans have learned to live under extreme situations. After the fall of the Soviet Union Cubans were forced to find new ways to survive. In the 1990s Cuba began to suffer the economic consequences of the fall of the Soviet Union from which its basic support had come since the 1960s. This social context informs my reading and engagement with biblical texts. The Cuban reality that people face on the island constitutes my hermeneutical lens through which I read the story of Jael in the book of Judges. I look at this text from a perspective of survival, for which I use the term *resolviendo*[34] to capture how powerless Cubans find power and agency to face their daily lives.

The word *resolviendo*, meaning to find an answer or solution, was first used this way in Cuba in the early 1990s. Without Russian subsidies Cuba and its people had to create new economic opportunities. This was not an easy task. The Cuban

32. O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 110.

33. Schneider, *Judges*, 77.

34. For an extensive discussion on *resolviendo*, see Cristina García-Alfonso, *Resolviendo: Narratives of Survival in the Hebrew Bible and in Cuba Today* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

government named this period of economic crisis "special period" in an effort to convince the people that the stringent measures put into effect would last only a short time. The government announced a series of restrictions on food, medicines and medical supplies, and gasoline. This "special period," which still continues twenty-some years later, creates enormous difficulties for Cubans who can no longer buy what they need to survive with the salary they receive from the socialist government. Specifically, Cuban salaries are sufficient to supply food and other necessities for only half of each month. It is in this context that the words *resolver* and *resolviendo* began to have a special meaning for Cubans. *Resolver* in many ways became synonymous with struggling to survive or making do.

In Cuba today *resolver* has a more particular meaning. It refers to whatever one has to do to obtain the basic things needed to survive. *Resolver* is not about getting what one needs for the long term but, rather, by whatever means necessary enabling one's family to meet its daily needs. Since the government does not provide the food, medicines, or clothing that the people need and since the people have no money to buy such goods, *resolver* covers a range of activities. For example, a person working in a towel factory might steal a couple of towels and exchange them for the food someone grows in their backyard, which they are not allowed to sell legally. There are other drastic examples of *resolviendo* that include selling the body for survival or migration by one family member to support those left behind.

One of the interesting aspects about *resolviendo* is that for Cubans the invention or use of this word becomes itself a way of *resolver*, for the word covers and legitimizes the struggle for survival. At the same time, having a word to identify the action also legitimates the painful dilemma of dealing with these types of uncomfortable situations where atypical behaviors and actions that may not be considered moral are required in order to preserve life. Thus, to survive that struggle of breaking laws and moral codes, the word *resolviendo* is in itself a way of *resolver* or coming to terms with this issue.[35]

35. I am aware that when talking about *resolviendo* ethical questions may arise. *Resolviendo* and ethics are not separate. We cannot ask what role ethics plays in *resolviendo.* They are one and the same thing. By this I mean *resolviendo* is itself an ethic, an uncommon and atypical ethic of survival that shakes the foundation of what traditional ethical understandings may be to fight to preserve life as the central common good for humanity. Among untraditional and morally questioned ways of survival one can also find situations of just war, killing another human being as a

*Resolver* starts when people find themselves in extremely difficult situations and have to find ways of making it through the day. To find solutions, people have to change the ways in which they have dealt with everyday life. *Resolver* requires one to change the patterns in one's life, to shift one's values, and to make accommodations. We have put aside certain values in order to hold on to the highest value: life. *Resolver* becomes a way of facing life, of understanding life, its value and its requirements for survival. It is how one thinks about life: one has to *resolver* in order to live, and one lives in order to *resolver*. *Resolver* makes one be constantly on the lookout for opportunities to obtain the bare necessities of life, like food, medicine, and clothing. If one is not able to *resolver*, one's life is in jeopardy. The main theme of *resolviendo* that informs my reading of the Jael story is that of preserving life at any cost. As philosopher Karl Jaspers states, "The objective of my *conscious struggle* against an opponent I can see is to expand my living space. It may be waged economically, by peaceful means, or by force of war, by surprising achievements, by trickery and harmful measures—in effect, an equally cruel fight goes on everywhere if the stakes are the expense of material existence, and ultimately life or death."[36] In other words, when life is at stake, it does not matter by what means we handle the struggle. *Resolviendo* is about people getting what they need in order to survive, regardless of how peacefully or fiercely that struggle may take place and regardless of whether it happens by trickery or other unconventional ways. I maintain that the story of Jael, when read through the lens of *resolviendo*, shows how an apparently submissive woman working within the patriarchal and dominant system she was part of becomes an agent of her own life and thus survives.

Jael appears in Judges 4:17 and 4:21 identified as the wife of Heber the Kenite who goes out to meet Sisera. Seen from an androcentric perspective, Jael's identity is linked to that of being a wife, a property of her husband, as women's sexuality was the property of their fathers and husbands in the ancient Israelite society. The second piece of information given to the reader concerns Jael's ethnic or tribal identity or, perhaps more important, her tribal loyalty. According to the text, Jael is the wife of Heber the Kenite whose family had a good relationship with King Jabin. The fact that there was a good relationship

way of preserving innocent lives, or stealing from those who are more fortunate to allow the less fortunate and the poorest to survive.

36. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 205.

between Heber's family and Jabin's family is indicative of the loyalty Heber had to the king. The fact that there was peace between King Jabin and the house of Heber the Kenite does not, however, ensure that Jael would be loyal to Jabin, particularly in a circumstance where Jabin was battling her people of origin.[37]

Jael knew the exceptions to the rules and the few alternatives society would allow her. In Near Eastern cultures the host was responsible for the entertainment and protection of the guest. Most of the time, a male guest would have been received by a male host. Victor H. Matthews holds that both Sisera and Jael break the codes of hospitality. Jael's actions constitute a conscious misuse of this ritual to lure Sisera to his death. Sisera, on the other hand, is more culpable than Jael in the ways he violates every step in the customary ritual.[38] Agreeing with Bal's idea that Jael did not believe she had to be faithful to King Jabin simply because her husband was loyal to him, we may now conclude that perhaps Jael was willing to seduce Sisera so he would come into her tent and she could kill him.

### *Jael and* Resolver*: The Struggle for Life*

Scholars, commentators, and preachers have often found Jael's story difficult to grasp. The difficulty has to do with what Jael does. Jael is seen as a "bad woman," not only because it is assumed that she lures Sisera into her tent and seduces Sisera, but also because she then violates the hospitality code by killing him. This negative assessment of Jael is made on the basis of assumptions about use of violence and of gender. Jael uses violence to *resolver* the situation she faces, and understandably this does not meet with everyone's approval. Faced with the same dilemma of using violence, however, men would typically be hailed as heroes for doing the same thing. For instance, in the previous chapter in the book of Judges, Ehud assassinates Eglon, a king who was oppressing the Israelites. Ehud's action is as violent as Jael's, yet his action is not viewed by scholars as negatively as Jael's. Readers look at violence differently when it is done by men than when it is done by women. These different evaluations of a similar act bring

37. Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 60.

38. Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4," *BTB* 21 (1991): 13–20.

up the second reason making Jael's story a difficult one: gender.[39]

In order to judge a particular use of violence, one needs to take into consideration the situation in which violence takes place.[40] Jael finds herself in a situation not of her making: Sisera comes to her. She knows that Sisera is the enemy of the Israelites, her people, and she uses the opportunity to *resolver* in the only way possible, given the situation in which she finds herself: she kills him. Jael, like most Cubans living on the island, has to *resolver* her particular situation by setting aside some of her society's values. Jael is accused by some scholars of having violated the codes of hospitality. From the perspective of *resolviendo*, however, she is facing up to the situation at hand by deciding that the life of her people and her own life justify overriding some of her other values.

*Resolver* is about using what is at hand to get what one needs to survive and provide for oneself and the people for whom one is responsible. In fact, this is what we see Jael doing in this story. She does nothing extraordinary, and, again, maybe that is why Sisera feels so safe with her. Nothing that she says or does makes the reader think that she planned her actions carefully or that she thought they were in any way extraordinary. She does not pray to YHWH for protection or guidance as Judith did (Jdt 9). She does not "announce" what she is about to do the way Judith announced her plans to the elders of the city (Jdt 8:32-34). Jael does not even mention YHWH as Deborah had earlier (Judg 4:9). She kills with the instruments usually found in any tent: pegs to secure the tent and a hammer to drive the pegs into the ground. She does not go looking for a sword to kill Sisera. She uses common things, everyday life tools, to do what she has to do to *resolver.*

The way in which Jael uses time to fulfill her plans constitutes a way of *resolver*. She does not precipitate her plans. Jael does not appear arguing with Sisera or even trying to convince him. She knows what to say and what she is not supposed to say. She speaks when it is necessary, as at the beginning of the story. Jael also recognizes the time to remain

39. Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4," *Semeia* 61 (1993): 100.

40. Ignacio Ellacuría, "Liberation Theology and Socio-Historical Change in Latin America," in *Towards a Society that Serves its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador's Murdered Jesuits*, ed. John Hassett and Hugh Lacey, trans. James R. Brockman (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 39.

silent, as when she obeys Sisera's order to stand at the tent's front door and protect him.

Like the narrator, Barak—the only other person in the story who "knows" what Jael has done—after seeing Sisera's body, has nothing to say. He does not praise Jael or thank her. Like the narrator, Barak remains silent, passing no judgment on Jael's action. Barak's and the narrator's silence about Jael's doings could well be read as their acknowledgment that she did what she had to do, that she took care of things in the simplest and most effective way she could. What Jael did, according to the way the narrator and Barak behave in the story, seems an ordinary thing: eliminating people who threaten the well-being of the community. To them, there is therefore nothing unusual to acknowledge. Jael was simply *resolviendo.*

After Jael's blow, the narrator takes over the time and space that Jael had controlled up to then and puts her actions in a wider perspective. Jael appears at the end of the chapter when the narrator capitalizes on the day in which Jael took care of things for herself and her people. The narrator tells us that "*on that day*" YHWH destroyed King Jabin. That day is an important day because of what Jael did. Even if the narrator does not mention Jael by name, the fact remains that Jabin may have continued to oppress the Israelites if Jael had not killed his general Sisera. She is the liberator of her people. Jael's *resolver* can be seen as an isolated act of one person *resolviendo*. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, however, YHWH is a God who uses simple people and their small and simple actions and turns them into wonderful and marvelous deeds (Gen 39:1-40; Exod 1; Jdt). Jael's act of *resolver*, her choosing life for herself and consequently for her people, becomes, in YHWH's eyes and for YHWH's purpose, an act that brings about the salvation of her people. In Jael's *resolver*, like in the case of many Cubans, one learns that when oppressive systems are unchangeable it is from the very inside of such systems that life needs to be defended.

*Cristina García-Alfonso*

Offering a different interpretation, Susan Ackerman looks for traces of political, military, and religious activities by women after the model of prominent females (human and divine) of ancient Near Eastern lore. In the particular case of Jael, hints appear in her credentials as a member of the Kenite group, whether by marriage or in her own right. The Kenites traced their origins to Cain: according to Genesis 4:19-22, Cain's descendants started metallurgy and music and resided in tents. Remember that

Jael's tent is mentioned even before her name in Judges 4:11. Ackerman argues that Jael's status is that of a religious functionary: (a) her ancestry to Cain and his special mark signaling priestly relationship to YHWH (Gen 4:15); (b) her tent being pitched under a terebinth or oak, a sacred tree (4:11); (c) the fact that Kedesh, one of Naphtali's cities of refuge for murderers, is mentioned as close by (Josh 21:32); and (d) her use of a hammer and a tent peg.[41] Were these strong arguments not enough, a word should be said also about the Kenites' association to Moses' father-in-law, as expressed in Judges 4:11 by referring to Hobab. This is another important hint to locate Jael in the religious sphere, because of the traces of female priestly activity by Moses' wife herself, Zipporah.[42] For Ackerman, the war against Sisera and Jabin is a holy war, having priority over the sanctity of the sanctuary, and that is the reason why Jael killed in the sanctuary.[43]

In summary, if one is to condemn Jael, then all the more should Ehud be convicted, because of similarities in tactic, in the enemy's stature, and in their being God's instrument favoring Israel. Not only that: if Jael is condemned, then every deliverer of his or her people, who uses whatever he or she has at hand to shatter an oppressor, should be condemned as well. Why is Jael's heroic deed downplayed in scholarship? Gender plays a role, no doubt, because she strikes not only a man but also men's fantasies and fears. But perhaps gender is not the only factor in discrediting her. When our perception of life's institutions is in general positive and especially if we have not suffered discrimination, violence,

41. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 89–109, 118–24. There is also a connection between music and Jael, which Ackerman explores as well (100–102). Since this relationship is less self-evident in our text, I have not explored it further. Given the role of music in people's lives (included but not restricted to the cult), however, and given also its association to cross-dressers, it should be further explored. See, for instance, Theodore W. Burgh, "'Who's the Man?' Sex and Gender in Iron Age Musical Performance," *NEA* 67 (2004): 128–36.

42. Ackerman, *Warrior*, 95–96, 101–21, referring to Benjamin Mazar, "The Sanctuary of Arad and the Family of Hobab the Kenite," *JANES* 24 (1965): 297–303 and other studies; see also Ursula Rapp, "Zipporah, the Vanishing of a Wife," in *Torah*, ed. Irmtraud Fischer and Mercedes Navarro Puerto, The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History 1.1, English ed. Jorunn Økland (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 313–28; Schneider, *Judges*, 72–73.

43. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 102; Ora Brison, "Jael, '*eshet heber* the Kenite: A Diviner?," in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, Texts @ Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 139–60.

or persecution from them, it is natural to recoil at someone who does not play by the rules, like Jael in this story. "The rules" of hospitality or behavior, however, are not class-free and much less are they power-free. In a society like ancient Israel in premonarchic times, in which peasants saw themselves subjected to powerful kings and empires, humiliated, despoiled and sometimes symbolically castrated or raped, picturing Sisera being treated that way must have helped them let off steam and forget for a time their troubles. Unfortunately, Judges tells us that even though mistreated, Israelite men in turn mistreated their women, children, and sojourners, and probably other people less powerful than them, such as slaves, the handicapped, or the elderly.

***The Depiction of Jael's Murder/ Sisera's Assassination from a Chinese Lens***

*An Easy Accusation of Treachery*

Reading Jael's story from an Asian perspective, particularly from a Chinese lens, can easily make one condemn her of treachery. The indictment is that Jael has violated a friend's trust. The word for "trust" (信, *xin*) in Chinese writing is made up of two words, people (人, *ren*) and word (言, *yan*), standing side-by-side. Its etymology conveys that people should stand by their word in order to gain people's trust. The concept of trust is a much valued norm in Confucian tradition. The trust of an associate should also be treated with respect. Jael, however, does not stand by her words to Sisera. She violates Sisera's trust. Her betrayal of a friend is therefore deemed unacceptable, to the point of quashing her motivation. It is all the more so when her deception is "directly related to women's inferior status and political powerlessness."[44] Therefore, a Chinese reading will compromise Jael's contribution in the total message of Judges. Yet, in my judgment, Jael's action is plausible. The trickery Jael uses resembles war tactics that ancient Chinese employed. Among the war strategies used in Chinese history, a popular one says, "All is fair in war" or "Nothing is too deceitful in war" (兵不厌诈). In time of war, it is acceptable to engage in deception. Therefore, moral condemnations pointing at Jael's covert tactics are unjustified, as

44. Esther Fuchs, "Who Is Hiding the Truth?," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 137.

Gale Yee has also rightly pointed out.[45] Yee has even suggested that Jael's luring Sisera into her tent may be part of Deborah's overall war plan.[46]

*Seduction and Murder*

Jael is easily condemned for infringing social etiquette required of a woman. She employs feminine charm. She lures a man into her "bedroom" when her husband is away. She sweet-talks the man into sleeping on her bed rather than on the ground. This is highly suggestive of a sexual invitation.[47] These actions are sufficient to question her sanctity. Ancient women characters are expected to be hospitable only when their man—either a father or a husband—is around. A Chinese would easily categorize a seductive woman as despicable. Jael is seen as a seductress and a deadly one at that. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义) contains an episode where a beautiful woman by the name of Diao Chan (貂蝉) is used as a political strategy to get rid of a tyrant, Dong Zhuo (董卓). Here, Jael's depiction finds a Chinese resemblance. But Jael surpasses Diao Chan because she does it out of her will, while Diao Chan is merely an instrument of men's political plotting. In addition, Chinese norms anticipate certain roles for women and men. Men are regarded as strong and powerful. Jael's killing of Sisera defies social custom that defines weak and strong as regards women and men. Therefore, the praise on Jael as a hero in Judges 5:24-27 is outrageous for many Chinese until the text brings in the divine will, qualifying her actions by singing her blessedness.

*Ironies Captured*

Chinese literature appreciates irony. Hence the ironies imbedded in Jael's story are intriguing for Chinese readers as well.

1. It is irony that a powerful warrior is killed by a powerless homemaker. In ancient culture, a man dying at the hand of a woman was humiliating. Here, the great general Sisera, a military force and an arch soldier, is thrashed by a tent-dwelling feminine figure. Thus Jael has the honor and Sisera, shame. It is ironic that a least likely woman warrior defeats a general of a Canaanite troop. She kills a man who commands thousands of soldiers, singlehandedly.
2. Readers have become more aware of satirical gender reversals in the story.

45. Yee, "By the Hand," 113.

46. Ibid., 113–14.

47. Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1–5: A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 201.

David Gunn points out the masculine form of Sisera's instruction to Jael in 4:20, assuming only "a man" will be of much concern.[48] Jael is told to say "no one" or, literally, "no man" is here. Indeed, Barak finds no man when he arrives with his army, but only a woman. It also turns out that there is indeed no one there in the tent, but a corpse.[49] From a feminist point of view, Jael's action is the fulfillment of a masculine role, which is essential to the irony of the story.[50] Jael proves that femininity does not equal weakness. She uses her perceived weakness to bring down a strong man.

3. Contrasting with Jael is Sisera's mother, who possesses a misplaced confidence in the war (5:28-30). Sisera's mother anticipates a victory as she is looking out from her window, not having a clue that the Israelite people have slaughtered her son's army. Her hunch is, as Judges 5:30 suggests, the army has taken some time to divide the spoils, specifically, "a girl or two" for the men and dyed garments for Sisera—to be given to her. Her anticipation speaks of her ignorance of their defeat. The irony stands out: Sisera is "made into woman booty in the tent of Jael"[51] as his mother waits for his victorious return with plunders. The poet in Judges 5 juxtaposes the scene of Sisera's death between a woman's legs with a portrait of his mother's anxious waiting by the window. Such irony makes the poem certainly exquisite in the Chinese poetic convention as well.

*Jael Acts as a Judge*

Affirming Jael's contribution in the Bible, a Chinese reader will recall a legendary heroine, Hua Mu-Lan (花木兰). She was originally described in a Chinese poem known as *The Ballad of Mulan* (木兰辞). The poem depicts her as a woman soldier, impersonating a man, who takes her aged father's place to fight in battles. She does not let her gender deter her from doing what was right in time of war. Like Jael, she proves that femininity does not

48. David M. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 91.

49. Trent Butler, *Judges*, WBC 8 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 106.

50. Lindars, *Judges 1–5*, 201.

51. Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 82.

equal weakness. She uses her perceived weakness to serve her country. But unlike Jael, she does not employ feminine charm, just physical strength. She killed tens of men in battles if not hundreds. It occurred when national safety overrode the status quo, and gender became less of an issue. Hua Mu-Lan's heroic act is celebrated by Chinese men and women alike. Her story has since inspired numerous screenplays and stage adaptations, including Chinese operas. It is easy to recall Hua Mu-Lan when one speaks of a war heroine like Jael. Both of them are depicted in the metaphor of a woman warrior—a disturbing anomaly for violating traditional boundaries.[52] They are accepted and celebrated nonetheless.

*Conclusion*

This cycle in the story of Judges begins with the spotlight on a woman judge, Deborah, and ends with a female warrior, Jael. The final verse gives a concluding theological remark: "So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan" (4:23). The poem in chapter 5 also illustrates the divine deliverance as a battle at a cosmic scale, recalling the divine deliverance in Exodus 15. So the story is a celebration of God's faithfulness. The credit of winning the war is ultimately given to God. This signals the theology of the Jael episode. It is remarkably important, however, that God uses a woman to subdue the Canaanite army during the time of judges. That gives the reason why Jael is hailed in the poem. Divine intervention alternates with human initiatives.[53] And Jael has a significant role. Gender is not an issue when God is at work. Like many male warriors, Jael is depicted as "an embodiment of God's will for justice and righteousness"[54] at a time when the Canaanites oppressed the Israelites, a time of tremendous hardship. After Jael's action, the people of Israel grew stronger and stronger until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan (4:24). So we celebrate Jael as a heroine of Israel.

*Elaine W. F. Goh*

52. Yee, "By the Hand," 99, 125. As Yee points out, the presence of woman warriors is highly possible in the pre-state Israel, albeit anomalous.

53. Niditch, *Judges*, 76.

54. J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 58.

## Canaanite King Jabin Is No More: Blessed Be Jael! (4:23-24)

Before we celebrate with Deborah this great victory of YHWH, it is important to note that Judges 4:23-24 takes up the motif of verses 1-3 and reiterates that "the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan" (v. 24).

Webb notes that the threefold repetition of "king of Canaan" in these verses should have taught Israel that "they should never have wanted to have" a king over them.[55] "An urgent robust engagement with an oppressor [was] required and in the persons of Deborah and Barak and Jael, Israel is not disappointed. The bee is an inspiration, the 'flash' triumphs gloriously and the honour of taking out the commander of Israel's oppressors goes to a woman with a name like a nanny goat!"[56] After these extraordinary actions: praise YHWH!

## Deborah's Song (5:1-31)

The song is ascribed to Deborah and Barak, but the verb appears in third feminine singular form, ותשר. It is a masterpiece, although some expressions remain obscure or contested and there are frequent changes of person in the song. (For instance, in v. 7 translations have to choose between "I arose" or "you arose" in reference to Deborah; neither variant diminishes Deborah's role as the one [together with Barak] who reinstalled order for Israel at a time of chaos and oppression.)

"The poetic account of chapter 5 conveys the events of the battle via allusion rather than description. Its tone is elevated, epic; its use of language, magnificent. The focus of the poem is praise of divine and human participants in the war."[57] The poem hints at a cosmic battle between YHWH and Israel's enemies through images and vignettes rather than by concrete descriptions; it calls on the hearers to celebrate Israel's victory, but at the same time it questions who is Israel, since several tribes gave deaf ears to Deborah's call.

### *A Few Notes on the Song's Contents and Structure*

Structurally, the song has been so diversely divided that I will abstain from discussing it and will only provide a few strokes. There is an in-

55. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 194.
56. Ryan, *Judges*, 31.
57. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 152.

*Judges 4:23-24*

[23]So on that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites. [24]Then the hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan.

troductory section in which Deborah calls on the other nations to join in praise (vv. 2-5); in verses 6-13 heroes and heroines are celebrated; there follows a stark contrast to antiheroes, families or tribes rebuked and cursed because of their mixed response to YHWH's/Deborah's call (vv. 14-23); and finally in verses 24-30 a contrast between two houses is built. One is a tent in which Jael dwells and will serve as Sisera's deathbed; the other one is, presumably, at Hazor since it is Sisera's palace, where he is vainly expected (vv. 28-30). The poem ends with a prayer against YHWH's enemies that, as noted by Webb, is quite ironic.[58] Finally, the chapter ends with the by now familiar note that "the land had rest for forty years" (v. 31b).[59]

Parallelism helps us see who or what are considered on equal terms. For instance, Shamgar son of Anath and Jael (v. 6) are referents for a time in which "caravans ceased and travelers kept to the byways"; Deborah and Barak are also mentioned together in verse 12 ("Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, utter a song! // Arise, Barak, lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam!"). There is ample use of irony as well: "Indeed, this sarcastic call to foreign kings and nobles early in the hymn sets the tone for the mockery of foreign kings and nobles in the battle account (5:19, 22) and its aftermath (5:28-30) and furnishes a foil to the hymn's victorious portrayal of Yhwh (5:20-21a) and his allies (5:24-27)."[60] In a very challenging article, Adrien Bledstein posits the book of Judges as a woman's satire on men playing God.[61] This song would be a precious

58. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 217, notes that the singers seem totally oblivious to the possibility that Israel may be YHWH's enemy, which has in fact already happened whenever YHWH sold them to an oppressive king.

59. There are several other proposals for structuring the Song. See, among other studies, Mark A. Vincent, "The Song of Deborah: A Structural and Literary Consideration," *JSOT* 91 (2000): 61–82; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 199–205; Thomas F. McDaniel, *The Song of Deborah: Poetry in Dialect; A Philological Study of Judges 5 with Translation and Commentary* (2003), 240–43, online publication http://tmcdaniel.palmerseminary.edu/.

60. O'Connell, *Rhetoric*, 114–15.

61. Adrien Janis Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire on Men Who Play God?," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 34–54.

*Judges 5:1-31*

5:1Then Deborah and Barak son of
Abinoam sang on that day,
saying:
2"When locks are long in Israel,
when the people offer
themselves willingly—
bless the LORD!

3"Hear, O kings; give ear,
O princes;
to the LORD I will sing,
I will make melody to the LORD,
the God of Israel.

4"LORD, when you went out from
Seir,
when you marched from the
region of Edom,
the earth trembled,
and the heavens poured,
the clouds indeed poured
water.

5The mountains quaked before
the LORD, the One of Sinai,
before the LORD, the God of
Israel.

6"In the days of Shamgar son of
Anath,
in the days of Jael, caravans
ceased
and travelers kept to the
byways.
7The peasantry prospered in
Israel,
they grew fat on plunder,
because you arose, Deborah,
arose as a mother in Israel.
8When new gods were chosen,
then war was in the gates.
Was shield or spear to be seen
among forty thousand in
Israel?

example *in nuce* of what the whole book is about: a female taunt on warriors growing plump, on generals who end up in a woman's tent only to be assassinated, on tent pegs being the latest deadly weapon in the market, and on powerful (or at least rich) mothers waiting in vain at a window. Irony may be detected also in the way the tribes are mentioned in the poem. While "Israel" is a structuring device demarcating stanzas, it becomes apparent that Israel is not all Israel.[62] Some tribes have ignored Deborah's call, keeping busy in their own region or travelling as far as possible from the site of conflict. It is so bad that one group, Meroz, is cursed; would this curse be the reason for its disappearance from any tribal list, indeed from the Bible itself? It would not be unlikely. Finally, the last stanza plays also with irony in its depiction of Sisera's court at home, waiting in vain for his return. We will first meet Jael, so that we may visit Sisera's palace once he is dead and shattered at Jael's tent.

62. Vincent, "Song of Deborah," 71–72.

[9]My heart goes out to the
commanders of Israel
who offered themselves willingly
among the people.
Bless the LORD.

[10]"Tell of it, you who ride on white
donkeys,
you who sit on rich carpets
and you who walk by the way.
[11]To the sound of musicians at the
watering places,
there they repeat the triumphs
of the LORD,
the triumphs of his peasantry
in Israel.

"Then down to the gates marched
the people of the LORD.

[12]"Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, utter a song!
Arise, Barak, lead away your
captives,
O son of Abinoam.
[13]Then down marched the
remnant of the noble;
the people of the LORD
marched down for him
against the mighty.
[14]From Ephraim they set out into
the valley,
following you, Benjamin, with
your kin;
from Machir marched down the
commanders,
and from Zebulun those who
bear the marshal's staff;
[15]the chiefs of Issachar came with
Deborah,
and Issachar faithful to Barak;
into the valley they rushed out
at his heels.
Among the clans of Reuben
There were great searchings
of heart.

*Deborah: A Mother in Israel*

The appellative "a mother in Israel" (v. 7) appears in the second hemistich of an obscure verse, which may be translated in diverse ways:

The rulers ceased in Israel, they ceased
Until I arose, Deborah, I arose, a mother in Israel!

or,

The rulers ceased in Israel, they ceased
Until you arose, Deborah, you arose, O mother, in Israel!

Since the next verse changes subject, we do not have much material to discern the intention of the title. Nowhere are Deborah's children mentioned; thus, rather than information on her family life we take it as an honorific title, similar to the one Elisha pronounced as Elijah ascended to heaven ("Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" 2 Kgs 2:12).

*Judges 5:1-31 (cont.)*

16 Why did you tarry among the sheepfolds,
to hear the piping for the flocks?
Among the clans of Reuben
there were great searchings of heart.
17 Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan;
and Dan, why did he abide with the ships?
Asher sat still at the coast of the sea,
settling down by his landings.
18 Zebulun is a people that scorned death;
Naphtali too, on the heights of the field.

19 "The kings came, they fought;
then fought the kings of Canaan,
at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo;
they got no spoils of silver.
20 The stars fought from heaven,
from their courses they fought against Sisera.
21 The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon.
March on, my soul, with might!

22 "Then loud beat the horses' hoofs
with the galloping, galloping of his steeds.

23 "Curse Meroz, says the angel of the LORD,
curse bitterly its inhabitants,
because they did not come to the help of the LORD,

Esther Hamori examines several instances where the expression "father" appears, and finds:

> Almost every one of these "masculine counterparts" shows metaphorical parent language applied to a prophet; the exception is a priest. The language does not just connote a sense of "warmth and security." These examples demonstrate that such terminology refers to religious intermediaries and, most commonly, to prophets. Additionally—though this is not crucial—the only one of the list [of people honored with this parental title] who is not a prophet, the priest of Micah's home sanctuary, is associated with Micah's teraphim (ancestor figurines sometimes used for divination . . .). The metaphorical parent language is specific to intermediaries and, overwhelmingly—or possibly exclusively—those with divinatory roles.[63]

While we do not know Deborah's age, she is definitely a positive role model for leadership, even if associated with war.

63. Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 85–86.

to the help of the LORD against
the mighty.

24"Most blessed of women be
Jael,
the wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tent-dwelling women most
blessed.
25He asked water and she gave
him milk,
she brought him curds in a
lordly bowl.
26She put her hand to the tent peg
and her right hand to the
workmen's mallet;
she struck Sisera a blow,
she crushed his head,
she shattered and pierced his
temple.
27He sank, he fell,
he lay still at her feet;
at her feet he sank, he fell;
where he sank, there he fell
dead.

28"Out of the window she peered,
the mother of Sisera gazed
through the lattice:
'Why is his chariot so long in
coming?
Why tarry the hoofbeats of his
chariots?'
29Her wisest ladies make answer,
indeed, she answers the
question herself:
30'Are they not finding and dividing
the spoil?—
A girl or two for every man;
spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera,
spoil of dyed stuffs
embroidered,
two pieces of dyed work
embroidered for my
neck as spoil?'

31"So perish all your enemies, O
LORD!
But may your friends be like
the sun as it rises in its
might."

And the land had rest forty years.

*Jael, Most Blessed of Women*

In this paragraph we will explore those elements most characteristic of Jael, particularly in how they might differ from her depiction in chapter 4. In sharp contrast to Meroz's cursing in the previous verse, the first thing we hear about Jael is an invocation: "Blessed be she, Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite or Jael, the woman from the Kenite group (or band), above all women dwelling in tents" (vv. 24-27). The song goes on to indicate that Sisera asked for water and she gave him milk/curd (parallel terms) in a lordly bowl.[64] Why curd and not water and why in

64. Ryan, *Judges*, 41, notes the suspense created in the song because, unlike the prose story, we are not given the man's name until he is hit a deadly blow a couple of verses later. Here, only the masculine verbal form is used.

a special bowl is not said. Perhaps considering the imminence of the battle nobody had fetched water and the only drink Jael had left was milk; perhaps she wanted to appease any suspicion by treating him as an honorable guest; perhaps its sedative quality played a role; or perhaps it was part of an oracular process. Schneider affirms the sexual innuendo of the story as in line with the presentation of other women in Judges, whose sexual status as secondary women or virgins will play a significant role in their stories.[65]

***Deborah in the African American Tradition***

I am an African American woman whose early religious experience was formed in a black Baptist church in California. I include this description first because it informs my experience of the biblical figure Deborah. I remember hearing African American churchwomen offer Deborah, a woman prophet, as evidence to those who objected to women in church leadership roles. Some women were self-designated "prophetesses," although this usually referred to their preaching vocation rather than to any claims of prophetic intermediation. Appropriating a biblical figure such as Deborah was validation for many African American Protestant women, for whom the Bible is the highest source of authority.

Second, as a womanist biblical scholar who is regarded by some as belonging to the third generation of womanist religious scholars, the separation by both geography and time from the brutality of living in the Jim Crow South that first-generation scholars such as Renita Weems, Katie Cannon, and Jacquelyn Grant experienced locates my reading of the Bible in a different socio-political location. Nevertheless, we still share the tridimensional oppression of racism, sexism, and classism as African American women. Therefore, I offer a womanist approach to the reception history of Deborah's story that draws on my own cultural bias based on African American Christian women's experiences and engages the simultaneously intersecting and overlapping forms of oppression based on gender, race, and class that African American women have encountered in church and society.

*Mother in Israel*

A prominent role for women in the black church tradition is the "Church Mother" or "Mother of the Church." An honorific title, Church Mothers may or may not be biological mothers, but

65. Schneider, *Judges*, 93, sees Achsah as making her request of her father after her first sexual relationship to her husband.

they are venerated figures of the church. They are almost always elderly women (usually around age seventy) who are respected for their spiritual maturity, moral authority, and leadership.[66] The Church Mother usually has a reserved seat in the congregation that can be reassigned only on the occasion of her death.

Cheryl Gilkes traces this tradition of honoring the elderly women in the community with the Mother title to West African cultural practices. African American women, however, usually refer to the biblical precedence of Deborah as a "Mother in Israel" for the tradition. According to Anthea Butler, "Generally, pastors and women, when discussing the Church Mother, referred to Judges 5:7, which describes the prophetess Deborah as a 'Mother in Israel.'"[67]

Nineteenth-century African Methodist Episcopal (AME) exhorter Jarena Lee, in her autobiography, referred to an elderly woman named Jane Hutt, a "sister in Christ," who accompanied her on a visit with a terminally ill young man. When the man took a turn for the worse, Lee called on Hutt, "who was still among us as a 'Mother in Israel'" to pray for his conversion before his death.[68] A contemporary of Lee's, activist Maria Stewart worked to secure opportunities of formal higher education for African American women. She referenced Deborah in her farewell speech in support of her position that women's leadership and authority were divinely sanctioned:

> What if I am woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead?[69]

66. Audrey Lawson Brown, "Afro-Baptist Women's Church and Family Roles: Transmitting Afrocentric Cultural Values," *Anthropological Quarterly* 67 (1994): 179, available from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3317417; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 103.

67. Anthea Butler, "A Peculiar Synergy: Matriarchy and the Church of God in Christ" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2001), 28, http://etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-0328101-224926/unrestricted/contents.pdf.

68. Jarena Lee, *Religious Experiences and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee: Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1997), 17, available from http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm9716/@/geberuc%5FBookView.

69. Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 22.

*Military Leader*

African American women have also appropriated Deborah for her role as a military leader to support their position in the church beyond support roles. While some may argue the extent of Deborah's military leadership in Judges 4 and 5, African American women such as Ella Pearson Mitchell, a teacher and preacher known affectionately as the "dean of Black women preachers," described the story of Deborah in the Bible as "certainly one of the most dramatic instances of God's breakthrough" of the cultural biases that opposed women in religious leadership. She went on to describe Deborah as a military hero, counselor, and judge, who God used to "revive and revitalize God's people as no man in her time was apparently able to do."[70]

Yet, African American women have had to contend with such views as African American pastor and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Kevin L. Smith, who regards African American women leaders in the church and home as "*de facto* matriarchs," who have taken on such positions as a consequence of the decline of male spiritual leadership.[71] He attributes the usurpation of African American male responsibilities by African American women to the men being too "passive and irresponsible" to fulfill their rightful leadership roles. He argues that African American women would gladly step aside and let men take their biblically mandated positions if and when the men are finally prepared to do so.

While there are more than a few African American women who share, to some degree, the sentiment that women should leave leadership positions to men, they also agree that it is necessary that women intervene if men are absent or fail to lead. An example is the Deborah Movement in Chicago. A group of women, mostly African American and affiliated with the Black Star Project, organized the Deborah Movement in 2010 to address the growing number of Chicago children and youth affected by violence. They were frustrated by what they viewed as a lack of protection by the police and the men of the community. The invitation went out to African American women to take the lead and win the war against violence in their neighborhoods. The group called itself the

70. Ella Pearson Mitchell, ed., *Those Preachin' Women: Sermons by Black Women Preachers*, vol. 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1985), 15.

71. Kevin L. Smith, "The Challenge of Matriarchy: Family Discipleship and the African American Experience," in *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical, and Practical Perspective*, ed. Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011), 138.

Deborah Movement: Women as Mothers, Prophetesses, Judges, Warriors and Leaders Working to Eliminate Violence in Chicago, but they mostly saw themselves as on the frontlines of the war against their children.

As each woman stood to introduce herself she began with, "My name is (fill in the blank) and I am Deborah." They chose to name the movement after the biblical figure Deborah with reference to Judges 4:8: "And Barak said to [Deborah], 'If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.' And she said, 'I will surely go with you'" (NRSV). Their interpretation of this passage was that Deborah was honored for answering the call to fight battles for God that men would not.

*Woman Prophet*

Even more popular than the role of military leader is that of prophetess for the appropriation of Deborah by African American women. African American women have been recognized in their religious communities as prophetesses as early as the antebellum period. Albert Raboteau provides the example of Sinda, an elderly enslaved woman and prophetess with considerable religious influence among her fellow slaves. Another elderly enslaved woman in the late nineteenth century, Maum Katie of the Sea Islands, is described as a "'spiritual mother,' a fortune teller or, rather, prophetess, and a woman of tremendous influence over her spiritual children."[72] Although Raboteau does not cite Deborah or other biblical women prophets for informing these enslaved communities' recognition of certain women as prophetesses, numerous African American women have done so.

Nineteenth-century evangelist Zilpha Elaw tried unsuccessfully to convince a certain Mr. and Mrs. D. of England, who maintained that God did not allow women to preach, that God had called her just as God had "raised up Deborah to be a prophetess, and to judge His people."[73] During this same period, AME minister Morris Hamilton cited Deborah as a prophetess and Mary as the mother of Christ in defense of women's work in the church, although in a support role, not as leaders.[74] The "Inspire" note in the *NIV Aspire: The New Women of Color Study Bible* on women in preaching ministries encourages

72. Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 238.

73. William Andrews, *Sisters in the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 147.

74. Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African-American Women and Religion* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 60.

women to turn to the biblical witness of Deborah, Miriam, and Huldah for inspiration that God indeed speaks through women.[75]

The tradition of African American churchwomen appropriating the biblical Deborah to both sanction their call to preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to hold leadership positions in the church is an example of their struggle for gender inclusion. Such women as Maria Stewart also used biblical texts, however, to advocate for racial progress and upward mobility. Deborah's legacy as Mother in Israel, military leader, and prophetess will continue to be a source of inspiration for African American women.

*Vanessa Lovelace*

At any rate, Sisera had no time to appreciate such niceties (or entertain our questions), for we are immediately told that Jael's hand went to the peg, the other hand to the hammer and that is where the action starts. In contrast to the prose narrative, where two verbs suffice to tell of Sisera's demise, the song includes "a catalogue of thirteen Hebrew verbs describ[ing] a frenzy of slaughter activity: five feminine verbs describe what Jael did to her victim, two of which are repeated, followed by eight masculine verbs which describe what her male victim received."[76] These include smiting with the hammer, annihilating, striking, so that, as Ryan puts it, by then to say that he was dead is an understatement. As if to stress that he has become an object of her actions, the last verb is a passive participle: he is devastated, despoiled, destroyed. Ryan discredits the erotic connotations and settles for sheer violence. Instead, as mentioned when discussing Jael's role in chapter 4, Susan Niditch detects several erotic connotations of this story, words and expressions pointing to a reversed rape. Sisera kneels between her legs and there he falls (see similar images in reference to women in Job 31:10; Ezek 16:25). "Having a woman do the womanizing, the man despoiled just as he is in a position of sexual seducer himself, makes for an especially powerful portrait of the victor."[77] The main problem with these erotic images (not with Niditch's perceiving them) is that they reinforce gender prejudices. The mere use of "womanizing" to refer to the man being subjugated and

75. Cynthia E. Woods, "Inspire: Women in Preaching Ministries," in *NIV Aspire: The New Women of Color Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1278.

76. Ryan, *Judges*, 41.

77. Niditch, "Eroticism," 52 (on erotic imagery in this chapter and other biblical texts, see 46–51).

made to fall between a woman's legs in a rape-like situation must be accompanied by a note indicating our displeasure with ancient or modern presuppositions that being a woman is less valuable than being a man, that assuming certain sexual positions as inferior or passive is biased, and that what is wrong is rape in whichever form.

Earlier I referred to Brenner's study of these two chapters' characters. It was said that in Judges 4 there are three pairs of commanders (Deborah, Jabin, and YHWH), each followed by a military hand (Barak, Sisera, and Jael). In chapter 5, Brenner sees two triangles with one common side, so that they form a rhombus. Here, three women face each other in one triangle in which at least the two on opposite sides are said to be mothers (the good one, Deborah, and the wrong one, Sisera's anonymous mother, and Jael potentially becoming one). The three men (Barak, Sisera, and YHWH—the divine Warrior is masculine) form the other triangle where weapons may be extraordinary (like flooding) but they are within the realm of the battlefield.[78]

The poem turns from the most blessed of women dwelling in tents to another woman, who enjoys a much higher social status, has her own entourage of wise ladies, and lives in a palace—but not for long.

### *Sisera's Mother and Her Advisors*

Like Delilah and Jezebel in another book, Sisera's mother is a very interesting character, created to be despised, together with all her people (vs. 28-30). She is anonymous, referred to only as "mother of" and is depicted staying at home, looking through a window, waiting, worrying at the army's delay in returning, talking to her counselors and to herself, and perhaps crying out or wailing. Schneider makes the intriguing comment that in chapter 5 "Sisera retains a secondary position to his mother," while in chapter 4 he held that secondary role in relation to his king, Jabin.[79] Unlike Deborah, who sits under a palm tree to rule over her people, and Jael, who comes out of her tent to greet Sisera, she is enclosed within the palace's compound and her only relationship to the outside

78. Brenner, "A Triangle and a Rhombus," 135, further contends that "the female triangle with its (at least) two maternal vertices—Deborah, Jael, Sisera's mother—stands for milk and nourishment (or their lack). The male triangle—Barak, God, Sisera—stands for water."

79. Schneider, *Judges*, 89. Contra Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 217, who considers her as totally dependent on her son, without whom "she is nothing."

world happens through her window.[80] Insofar as she is "woman at the window," she "is by necessity a conformist, occupying the position of the spectator assigned to her by the male community."[81]

Renate Jost notes that, unlike his role as general in Judges 4, in chapter 5 Sisera is depicted as a king.[82] And his mother shares and enjoys the life of the powerful, with an entourage of advisors (v. 29). To these indications pointing to her role as queen mother, an administrative and religious important role in the ancient Near East, Ackerman adds the indication of her presence at the window. She points to archaeological studies indicating the relationship of images of a "woman at the window" (a woman who might be surrounded by a temple's columns rather than a window) with sanctuaries dedicated to Asherah.[83] With these data in mind, the words of Sisera's mother as she awaits her son's return show a deeper meaning than most commentator notice. She is depicted as fantasizing about colorful spoils of war brought to her, after the soldiers are done with using young women (v. 30). Her preoccupation is with embroidered pieces of cloth plundered from conquered women and of raped pubescent girls for her son and the other warriors.

Now, sex is rarely just sex. Nonconsensual sex is rape, and rape is power. Rape of enslaved people, however, is rarely considered rape because they have no right over their own bodies.[84] Here, Sisera's mother is speaking of girls taken as booty, meaning slaves or, to put it politically

80. As noted, however, by Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 26, except for her two times coming out to meet Sisera and Barak, Jael remains within the confines of her tent. Sophie Kauz ("Frauenräume im Alten Testament am Beispiel der Siedlung," *Lectio Difficilior* 2 [2009]: 14–16; http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/09_2/pdf/kauz_frauenraeume.pdf) explores the artistic motif of the woman at the window, as shown in Phoenician reliefs from the ninth to the seventh centuries BCE. These have a woman's head surrounded by a window frame, through which the onlooker has a limited, yet possible relationship to the outside world. Kauz also calls attention to the androcentric perspective of such depictions, since they look from the street into the window.

81. Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 23.

82. Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 139.

83. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 155–62; Nadav Na'aman, "Queen Mothers and Ancestors Cult in Judah in the First Temple Period," in *Berührungspunkte: Studien zur Sozial- und Religionsgeschichte Israels und seiner Umwelt. Festschrift für Reiner Albertz zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ingo Kottsieper, Rüdiger Schmitt, and Jakob Wöhrle (Münster: Ugarit, 2008), 479–90.

84. Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 53–82; Susanne Scholz, "Gender, Class, and Androcentric Compliance in the Rapes of Enslaved Women in the Hebrew Bible," *Lectio Difficilior* 1 (2004), http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/04_1/Scholz.Enslaved.htm.

more correctly, captive brides (see Deut 21:10-14). "So these women are doubly dehumanized; they are not only property to be divided up by men like bits of cloth, but they are also 'wombs,' valued only for their erotic and reproductive potential."[85] Whether their function will be production or reproduction or both is not stated: we are not given access to that depth in the Canaanite woman's calculation. Nevertheless, we may agree with Webb and with Schneider that "the reference to women not as women but as wombs indicates that the immediate priority was to use these women for rape and potential bearers of future slaves."[86]

***Women as Booty: Reading Reality in Colombia in the Light of Judges 5:28-31***

Colombia has suffered more than fifty years of armed conflict. During that period, the several factions involved in war—army, guerrilla, paramilitaries—have sexually abused and exploited women, both civilians and combatants.[87] Women's bodies have become battleground and instrument to achieve military goals. Many of these abuses remain unconfessed, particularly if its perpetrators belong to the State; nor are those cruelties committed by "outlaws" brought to trial in the processes seeking truth and justice about the war. Often, victims continue to be victimized after the end of the war. Many stories show us how women and girls are the unrecognized victims of the Colombian war, having been abducted from their families, gang raped, mutilated, and so forth.[88]

Here we briefly look at the virgins' fate in Judges 5:28-31. In both stories, women are war booty. "These women, who are booty, are not seen as full persons but only as objects to be raped and impregnated. Sisera's mother, the uterus that contained the Canaanite general, comforts herself thinking of other uteruses being raped."[89] The text offers

85. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 217.

86. Schneider, *Judges*, 96.

87. Amnistía Internacional, "Colombia, cuerpos marcados, crímenes silenciados. Violencia sexual contra las mujeres en el marco del conflicto armado," October 2004, http://www.legal-tools.org/doc/3a7171/pdf/.

88. I have included several victims' life stories in Maricel Mena-López, "Crimen de honor, guerra y religión. Memoria de mujeres violadas en la Biblia Hebraica y en la actualidad," *Teología y Sociedad* (Cali) 10 (2012): 47–69.

89. Maricel Mena-López, "Violencia sexual y desplazamiento forzado a la luz del libro de los Jueces," *RIBLA* 63 (2010): 60.

two edges: one, the fate of women taken as booty, and the second, the sacred component of this violent act.

The general's mother evokes a common Canaanite practice in war, that of allotting spoil among the victors. The term translated "girl" (v. 30) is רחם, "uterus, feminine organs," and it belongs to the semantic field of רחמים, "compassion, mercy." That place of mercy in which life originates is violated. Israelite soldiers also dreamed of using this practice of utterly killing the men (Hebrew חרם) in order to get the women for themselves (cf. Deut 2:34-35).

In the Song of Deborah, Yahweh and the people's army oppose Sisera and his war chariots, but there is no opposition to the Canaanite cities' cults and divinities. Even though holy wars were not wars because of religion, they were deeply religious, since they expressed Yahweh's action for the sake of the people. People associated themselves to their God by an act of faith and fulfilled a ritual or rituals. Thus, rape was also legitimated by Yahwism.

In its report *Las mujeres frente a la violencia y la discriminación derivadas del conflicto armado en Colombia* (2006), the Commission on Human Rights of the American States Organization affirms that violence against women was used as a war strategy by different groups, as they sought to control territory and settled communities. The report identifies four forms of violence. The first form is dehumanization of the victim (the majority of whom were men) by raping the women closely associated to him. As a consequence of these actions, a situation of family uprootedness and displacement from their territory occurs by forced migration. A third form of violence is forced recruitment of women and girls, with nonconsensual sexual availability for the militiamen as part of their service. The fourth form of violence is social control over communities in their own territories.[90]

This reality of violence and abuse cries out to us and invites us to keep alive the memory of those victimized sisters. Giving voice to those atrocities ensures that those crimes are never filed and forgotten. Keeping a memorial of suffering is a prophetic action because it shows how imperfect the social system remains regarding the victims of violence and their human rights. Memorialization is also a cry on behalf of women's humanity, a call to justice to care for the female half of the human population. It

90. http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/ColombiaMujeres06sp/Informe%20Mujeres%20Colombia%202006%20Espanol.pdf.

requires radically honoring the female neighbor in need.

If people of faith honestly commit ourselves to real transformation of the overall conditions in which these women live, one of our tasks is that of sensitization and solidarity in concrete actions. There is, however, another deeper commitment expected from church and theology, namely, coming to terms with its own misogyny, facing its past—in its present—with regard to women. Achieving justice for women is a holistic enterprise; it involves heart, guts, womb (רחם), and cleverness; and it is our collective, not our private or individual, challenge.

*Maricel Mena López*

To sum up, Sisera's mother's image is that of a worried mother, who peers through the window, anxious to see her son come back home safely. Maternal instinct scores high in sympathy from the audience: even a Canaanite mother worries about her son! She is not, however, attuned to the suffering of the conquered people. Leaving aside for a moment that those singing this song are, precisely, the ones she imagines are the conquered people (and are the conquerors in that situation), it is sad to realize there are women who are ready to inflict pain and oppression on other women, whose allegiance is not to other women but to the powerful commanders. But then, men also oppress other men (and women), treating people as bodies to be used and discarded. War and despoliation, including trafficking of captives—one strong theme in Judges—is just one way oppression expresses itself. The poem leads the reader, then, to move from sympathy for the worried mother to shock at her callousness. And as the reader realizes that this is the Canaanite general's mother, she or he will probably think, "No wonder Israel celebrates with Deborah these oppressors' demise!"

### *Are Mothers Necessary?*

Especially in the last verses of this chapter, mothers play a key role. Since these are the first mothers in Judges, analysis of their roles is complex because so far there are no other models available for comparison. Later in the book a few mothers will be referred to without being present in their children's stories (e.g., the mothers of Gideon's seventy sons, including Abimelech's mother; Jephthah's mother and his child's mother, all of them anonymous); later still, Samson's and Micah's mothers will

be allowed a voice and an important role in their children's lives. The book ends with prospective mothers, since the reason for the Benjaminites to be allowed to abduct girls is to marry them, so that the tribe is not decimated (Judg 21).

Are mothers necessary? Of course, at the literal level this is a silly question, since without mothers there are no sons or daughters. My question here, however, plays with the immediate level of the contrast between Deborah and Sisera's mother and their role as mothers in the chapter and, more broadly, in Judges. As Cheryl Exum states in reference to Sisera's mother, she "serves as the mouthpiece for the male ideology of war, in which pillage and rape go together. . . . The androcentric narrator who places these words in the mouths of Sisera's mother and her female attendants thus suggests that men go to war to plunder for the sake of their women, and that this is something women want ('two embroideries for my neck as spoil')."[91] Deborah herself commands her children to go to war and rejoices in other people (other mothers' children) being killed in battle. Deborah is a mother who sends her children to fight because all their lives depend on their success. "In wartime the fate of women is determined by men. Israel's victory means peace for Israel's women and a share of the spoils; defeat means despair and the dread of an approaching victorious foreign male army."[92] If we also include Jael in this picture, then there is also the deceptive mother who gives birth (between her legs), offers milk, puts the son to sleep, and then kills him. Susan Niditch perceives in this story "a man's fear of both death and his own sexuality, his insecurities, a male fantasy of Eros become Thanatos."[93] I agree that in this story one can perceive male fears, especially related to a woman's sexual allure, as well as fear of women's deceptive ways—women who seem to be mothers but turn out to be assassins. And I can also perceive women's fears, of losing beloved ones, of losing the war, of becoming the enemies' prey.

There is yet another level of meaning, for Sisera's mother's voice comes to us sung by another woman, Deborah, whose song is included by the narrator, whose voice reflects male concerns, at least in the final Deuteronomistic version. The result is a poetic masterpiece and an ideologically well-accomplished message, which invites the reader to take sides with the right mother. But is there a right mother? We must be careful here,

91. Exum, "Feminist Criticism," 73.
92. Ryan, *Judges*, 37.
93. Niditch, "Eroticism and Death," 52.

because one very successful patriarchal trick is to set one woman against another, so that there is no solidarity between them (or us). When there are two warring parties or nations and one woman takes sides with one of them, it is very hard, counter-cultural indeed, to be able to worry or feel pity for the other side's women: "Your army wins, we will be raped and/or killed; we win, you will be raped or killed" is a strong message.[94] "Deborah attributes to Sisera's mother the tendency to convert human beings to objects. In the old lady's language, the essence of masculinity is represented by noisy, speeding vehicles, while femininity is merely a 'womb.'"[95]

*Some Final Reflections*

An added problem in the analysis of this cycle is its stereotyping: why do all these women have to be mothers in order to be acceptable, when in the story being a mother is an important factor only for the Canaanite, elite, self-deceived, anonymous woman who waits in vain? Motherhood is not an issue in Deborah's or Jael's personal characterizations. Furthermore, the contrast of the good-Israelite-close-to-the-people mother with the bad-Canaanite-elite mother is also stereotyping. And by setting several different loyalties (at least gender, nationality, and class) in such a cluster that one has to choose where one stands ("us" against "the other"), it further stereotypes people. These stereotypes on motherhood, social class, and nationality will resurface in the way certain children are expelled from their paternal families in the stories of the next two judges (and also, albeit differently presented, as Solomon puts to the test his received wisdom and "solves" the riddle of who is the true mother and who is the lying mother in 1 Kgs 3). Perhaps because patriarchy has mastered the art of setting up one woman against another, it should not be surprising that there is no hint of any mutual relationship between Deborah and Jael except for Deborah's mention of her in the song.

> Only in the Song of chapter 5 does Jael's name cross Deborah's tongue as she praises Jael's actions in verses 24-27. The lack of information about the two women's relationship with one another is not surprising, given that this is not a matter of concern for the narrator of the book, who seems primarily engaged in demonstrating the sovereign freedom of the deity to act in unforeseeable ways in order to achieve

94. See Exum, "Feminist Criticism," 72–74.
95. Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window,* 25.

> the most dramatic of victories on behalf of Israel. A lesbian-identified reading, however, queries whether the two women have been kept deliberately separate, perhaps subconsciously, in order to prevent an excess of anxiety created by the narrative's only too clear demonstration of the results that can accrue when two women act in harness with each other.[96]

That the text puts distance between both women is an important hermeneutical fact, seldom noticed, Guest being an exception, for which I am particularly grateful. Perhaps that distance explains other feminist interpretations, which—with equal footing in the story—see Deborah and Jael as enemies or at least belonging to enemy peoples until Jael's opportunistic survival measures made them allies and accomplices.[97] Would it be wrong were this the case? The authors of Judges say, "No, there is nothing wrong if in the end the enemy is subdued." And a feminist reading (mine) would add that in a world that wants to make us believe women cannot act together but are always jealously competing with each other, the *how*s, the *why*s, and the *when*s may vary from one woman to another, but in the end what matters is that their common well-being be prioritized over other loyalties. In this line, Aschkenasy's reflection might help us. She contends that the "privileged women may feel safe in the palace of the mighty nobleman Sisera. Nevertheless, Deborah implies that being hemmed in, kept powerless and practically imprisoned, led to the women's denigration, or even hatred of their own sex. Deborah means to present more than just the cruelty of the Canaanite people, men and women; she intends to portray the dehumanizing impact of the position 'at the window' on women."[98]

What do we say when we say "a woman" or "a man"? What makes a biblical woman as much a "woman" as a twenty-first-century "woman"? And who decides that a woman who kills with a tent peg or with a gun is "not a woman"? There is a danger of falling into essentialist categories of womanhood—essentialist and anachronistic ones. There are no easy answers to these questions and thus, it is best to keep going and seek them as we go. Perhaps women who do not act as women and men who are rendered women is a more visible preoccupation in this

96. Deryn Guest, "Judges," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, and Mona West (London: SCM, 2006), 177–78.

97. See Mercedes Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio. In-conclusiones en el libro de los Jueces* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2013), 49–50.

98. Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 25.

cycle than in others in Judges. This preoccupation is, on the other hand, intertwined with another, more powerful one: a few women and many men who do what they think right in their own eyes, not in YHWH's eyes. Judges 4–5 has shown that, in God's eyes, women and men, tribes and families, and even stars may come together for the sake of freedom and of a life without a king.

It is time to move on to another cycle, in which, perhaps not surprisingly but "pendulum-like," there is an all-male warring and no females are mentioned.

# Judges 6:1–9:57

# *Gideon the Abiezrite and His Progeny*

There is much disagreement among scholars on whether Gideon's and Abimelech's cycles should or should not be separated from each other.[1] Elie Assis has identified Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah as the only rulers in Judges for whom their own leadership was important enough to turn against their fellow Israelites in order to keep it.[2] Another reason for reading both stories together is that Abimelech is never introduced as a risen judge or savior, or said to have YHWH's Spirit; we are left thus with two possibilities: either he belongs to Israel's enemies (such as Jabin in Deborah's time or Eglon) or he is part of Israel

1. For instance, Yairah Amit, *The Book of the Judges: The Art of Editing*, BibInt 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 222, considers them two different cycles united by 8:29-35, while Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 139–71, treats them as a unit. Adrien Janis Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire on Men Who Play God?," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 44–45, notes several contrasting elements between Gideon and Abimelech (noted and tabulated by E. T. A. Davidson, *Intricacy, Design, and Cunning in the Book of Judges* [Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2008], 34).

2. Elie Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal Interest: An Ideology of Leadership in the Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah Narratives (Judg. 6–12),* VTSup 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 2–3.

and therefore a scion of Gideon/Jerubbaal.[3] A third reason to speak of "Gideon and his progeny" is that in some ways they embody the adage "like father, like son."[4]

## Gideon's First Battles (6:1–7:25)

Gideon's cycle is formed by twelve units that include repeated demonstrations of YHWH's power to convince him that he would deliver his people, battle preparations, the execution of two kings because they had killed Gideon's maternal family, his rejection of kingship, and his relationship to religious symbols.[5] There are repetitions of the words "hand" and "fear," and innumerable inconsistencies appear throughout the chapters.[6] It is also noteworthy that, unlike other instances in Judges in which night means danger, at least four of Gideon's deals with YHWH involve events at night (tearing down Baal's altar, 6:25-32; the two fleece signs, 6:36-40; and the enemy's dream, 7:9-15a).[7] Perhaps Gideon was not ready to be openly Yahwist; at any rate, by the end of his life, the ephod he had made with the spoil from the conquered kings became a snare to Israel.

The first ten verses of chapter 6 take up the theme of YHWH's and Israel's relationship through mutual addresses with hardly any response from the other interlocutor. The introduction by the narrator speaks of a new people preventing Israel's goal of living from their land's products. "The situation described . . . portrays a devastating reality of a submissive Israelite masculinity."[8] These Midianites (and Amalekites and people from the East, 6:3) are strong enough to come like locusts, with livestock and camels, to take Israel's harvest and animals and impover-

3. Although there is also mention of his other name in 6:32, since in chap. 9 only Jerubbaal is mentioned as Abimelech's father, I will keep that name for that cycle.

4. As noted by Davidson, *Intricacy*, 53, including Gideon's and Jether's fear (6:30-31; 8:20) in her comparison of father-son relations in Judges.

5. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 223–25.

6. Ibid., 264–66.

7. See Weston W. Fields, "The Motif 'Night as Danger' Associated with Three Biblical Destruction Narratives," in *Sha'arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 17–32; Amit, *Judges*, 227–28, notes the use of "at night" to stress proximity in time of different events.

8. Meir Bar Mymon, "This Season You'll Be Wearing God: On the Meaning of Gideon and the Undressing of the Israelites (Judges 6:1–8:32)," in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, Texts @ Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 193.

*Judges 6:1–7:25*

6:1The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. 2The hand of Midian prevailed over Israel; and because of Midian the Israelites provided for themselves hiding places in the mountains, caves and strongholds. 3For whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them. 4They would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land, as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey. 5For they and their livestock would come up, and they would even bring their tents, as thick as locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came in. 6Thus Israel was greatly impoverished because of Midian; and the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.

7When the Israelites cried to the Lord on account of the Midianites, 8the

ish them. One cannot help but wonder to what degree the problem is a wrong perception of the neighbor as enemy. After all, Abraham had been promised a seed as numerous as the stars and the Midianites are also from Abraham's seed (Gen 25:2). They are also closely related to Moses' in-laws (who had helped Israel in the desert often).[9] The problem here is an overpopulation of nomads, livestock, and camels. As Tammi Schneider notes, however, "The nomadic lifestyle was the reason why Jael was in a place that she could kill Sisera in the last episode."[10] Perhaps this is the reason why YHWH's answer to Israel's outcry is unexpected. Unlike earlier and later occurrences, YHWH neither sends YHWH's Spirit on an individual, nor raises up a judge, nor instructs established judges to command a military attack. YHWH sends a prophet to confront the people for their lack of commitment to YHWH alone (vv. 8-10). The prophet's words may be understood as a reminder to Israel that they are their own foe. Midian is, after all, kin—distant cousins but kin nonetheless. Could we not read his words as stating "were you faithful to me, the land would produce enough for both Midian and you, and you would not see your kin as your enemy"?

9. Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 169.

10. Tammi Schneider, *Judges: A Commentary*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 101; see also 100–101, suggesting that "the bad thing" Judg 6:1 may refer to is intermarriage, which increased following Sisera's death by Jael.

LORD sent a prophet to the Israelites; and he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery; 9and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land; 10and I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not given heed to my voice."

11Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. 12The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior." 13Gideon answered him, "But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian." 14Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you." 15He responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." 16The LORD said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them." 17Then he said to him, "If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. 18Do not depart from here until I come to you, and bring out my present, and set it before you." And he said, "I will stay until you return."

19So Gideon went into his house and prepared a kid, and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour; the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the oak and presented them. 20The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. 21Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. 22Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the LORD; and Gideon said, "Help me, Lord GOD! For I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." 23But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die." 24Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and they called it, The LORD is peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.

25That night the LORD said to him, "Take your father's bull, the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father, and cut down the sacred pole that is beside it; 26and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, in proper order; then take the second bull, and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the

sacred pole that you shall cut down." 27So Gideon took ten of his servants, and did as the LORD had told him; but because he was too afraid of his family and the townspeople to do it by day, he did it by night.

28When the townspeople rose early in the morning, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the sacred pole beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. 29So they said to one another, "Who has done this?" After searching and inquiring, they were told, "Gideon son of Joash did it." 30Then the townspeople said to Joash, "Bring out your son, so that he may die, for he has pulled down the altar of Baal and cut down the sacred pole beside it." 31But Joash said to all who were arrayed against him, "Will you contend for Baal? Or will you defend his cause? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been pulled down." 32Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him," because he pulled down his altar.

33Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east came together, and crossing the Jordan they encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. 34But the spirit of the LORD took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. 35He sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them.

36Then Gideon said to God, "In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, 37I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said." 38And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. 39Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew." 40And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

7:1Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the troops that were there with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was north of them, below the hill of Moreh, in the valley.

2The LORD said to Gideon, "The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.' 3Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.'" Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained.

4Then the LORD said to Gideon, "The troops are still too many; take

them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there. When I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go with you; and when I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." 5So he brought the troops down to the water; and the LORD said to Gideon, "All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side." 6The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water. 7Then the LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes." 8So he took the jars of the troops from their hands, and their trumpets; and he sent all the rest of Israel back to their own tents, but retained the three hundred. The camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

9That same night the LORD said to him, "Get up, attack the camp; for I have given it into your hand. 10But if you fear to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah; 11and you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to attack the camp." Then he went down with his servant Purah to the outposts of the armed men that were in the camp. 12The Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the east lay along the valley as thick as locusts; and their camels were without number, countless as the sand on the seashore. 13When Gideon arrived, there was a man telling a dream to his comrade; and he said, "I had a dream, and in it a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell; it turned upside down, and the tent collapsed." 14And his comrade answered, "This is no other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, a man of Israel; into his hand God has given Midian and all the army."

15When Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped; and he returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Get up, for the LORD has given the army of Midian and all the army." 16After he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and put trumpets into the hands of all of them, and empty jars, with torches inside the jars, 17he said to them, "Look at me, and do the same; when I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. 18When I blow the trumpets, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets around the whole camp, and shout, 'For the LORD and for Gideon!'"

19So Gideon and the hundred who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. 20So the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars, holding in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow; and they cried, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" 21Every man stood in his place all around the camp, and all the men in camp ran;

they cried out and fled. 22When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. 23And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after the Midianites.

24Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters against them, as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan." So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they seized the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan. 25They captured the two captains of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the wine press of Zeeb, as they pursued the Midianites. They brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan.

There is no recorded answer to the prophet, neither by speech nor by amendment of habits; likewise, it is not attested how and where the Israelites are addressed by this prophet. The intrusive prophet leaves as abruptly as he appeared.[11] This scene intends (with 2:1-5; 10:6-16; and elsewhere) to guide the audience into an assessment of this unstable period. Immediately a new messenger appears, this time directly addressing Joash's youngest son, beating out grain hidden in his father's winepress. It is hard to say whether he lacks faith in YHWH or in himself, or whether there is something else here. Carolyn Pressler thinks his words highlight that he does not come forth on his own but that he is called.[12] Using Bourdieuian categories, Linda Dietch uncovers a Gideon whose ability with words and double entendre will bring him very far. Thus, she argues, the messenger's words (particularly the salutation) are misunderstood because they are "far too literal for one who revels in the mediums of figures and subtexts."[13] Judging from the extent of dialogue

11. Lee Roy Martin, "The Intrusive Prophet: The Narrative Function of the Nameless Prophet in Judges 6," *Journal for Semitics* 16 (2007): 113–40, defends this intrusion as theologically important. He states that it intrudes: (a) the narrative structure evident up to this chapter of cry to YHWH and deliverance, and (b) the Israelites' expectation for "a 'wonder' (Judges 6:13)" (114) rather than a word of admonition.

12. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 171.

13. Linda A. Dietch, *Authority and Violence in the Gideon and Abimelech Narratives: A Sociological and Literary Exploration of Judges 6–9*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 75 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 91.

and tests invested in convincing Gideon to accept his call, this is one of the author's preoccupations.[14] E. T. A. Davidson considers Gideon's behavior "comic throughout," for he is "an outright coward, as indeed are most of the Israelites and the Midianites in the story"; she identifies at least thirteen occasions in which he is fearful.[15] J. Paul Tanner shows that making Gideon believe in YHWH's promises is the center of the structure of the story.[16] It is no wonder that, if the one divinely chosen to deliver Israel does not believe God's direct message or even the tests he puts to YHWH, God's prophet would go unheeded. Israel and YHWH have reached a stage in which they have problems communicating with each other! Bar Mymon also notes that in order for YHWH to be a strong God in the people's eyes, a strong "Man" is needed as well.[17] YHWH's Spirit takes possession of Gideon (6:34) and wins a great battle where trumpets and jars are the weapons.

## Internal Conflicts, Kingship, and Family Dynamics (8:1-35)

After this great battle, we hear of the first internal conflicts, the first of which occurs as the Ephraimites complain for having been left out of the battle. This first conflict is averted by Gideon's response, in which he contrasts the Ephraimites' military skills (which allowed them to capture the kings) to his smallness (8:1-3). Intertribal strife involving Ephraim will occur later again and then it will not be solved by diplomacy (12:1-6). The next conflicts involving Gideon are recounted in an intertwined manner. The first one is Gideon's vengeance or just deserts on Penuel and Succoth for their refusal of bread (8:4-9, 13-17). The second event

14. Amit shows that the book has two main thematic *loci*, signs and leadership, which are interrelated yet discernible in Gideon's cycle; one depicts "a fearful hero" who needs God to show him time and again (by accumulating signs) that he has been chosen and will be successful; the other, "a decisive leader who was capable of uniting the divided people" (246); see also 251–56 on Gideon's appointment and signs. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 168, speaks of two movements: in the first God is the hero, while in the second one Gideon's confidence "appears to be in himself rather than in his God."

15. Davidson, *Intricacy*, 112.

16. J. Paul Tanner, "The Gideon's Narrative as the Focal Point of Judges," *BSac* 149 (1992): 157–59.

17. Bar Mymon, "This Season You'll Be Wearing God," 191–207. Looking at the text from another angle, John C. Yoder (*Power and Politics in the Book of Judges: Men and Women of Valor* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015], 33–44, 134–37) notes how Gideon would have increased his honor among the strong men of his society by performing such wonders.

*Judges 8:1-35*

8:1Then the Ephraimites said to him, "What have you done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against the Midianites?" And they upbraided him violently. 2So he said to them, "What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? 3God has given into your hands the captains of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; what have I been able to do in comparison with you?" When he said this, their anger against him subsided.

4Then Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the three hundred who were with him, exhausted and famished. 5So he said to the people of Succoth, "Please give some loaves of bread to my followers, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." 6But the officials of Succoth said, "Do you already have in your possession the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna, that we should give bread to your army?" 7Gideon replied, "Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will trample your flesh on the thorns of the wilderness and on briers." 8From there he went up to Penuel, and made the same request of them; and the people of Penuel answered him as the people of Succoth had answered. 9So he said to the people of Penuel, "When I come back victorious, I will break down this tower."

10Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about fifteen thousand men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the east; for one hundred twenty thousand men bearing arms had fallen. 11So Gideon went up by the caravan route east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and attacked

is his execution of Midianite Kings Zebah and Zalmunna (8:10-12, 18-21).[18] The latter, a seemingly ordinary event in war, is important to us for at least two reasons. The first is that it is one of the few glimpses into father-son relationships. The second reason is that the narrator links it to dynastic kingship, immediately offered to Gideon by the "men of Israel" (8:22). In the next sections we will review Gideon's family dynamics and Gideon's offer of kingship.

### *Gideon's Family*

Looking with feminist lenses, Gideon's family configuration is particularly interesting, for it is a patriarchal family at its best. Gideon belongs to the rural elite: his father Joash is rich enough to own at least

18. Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 104, notes resemblances with the Nabal episode in David's life (1 Sam 25) and considers the language used indicates just deserts considering the army's hunger.

*Judges 8:1-35 (cont.)*

the army; for the army was off its guard. 12Zebah and Zalmunna fled; and he pursued them and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and threw all the army into a panic.

13When Gideon son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres, 14he caught a young man, one of the people of Succoth, and questioned him; and he listed for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven people. 15Then he came to the people of Succoth, and said, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Do you already have in your possession the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna, that we should give bread to your troops who are exhausted?'" 16So he took the elders of the city and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them he trampled the people of Succoth. 17He also broke down the tower of Penuel, and killed the men of the city.

18Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "What about the men whom you killed at Tabor?" They answered, "As you are, so were they, every one of them; they resembled the sons of a king." 19And he replied, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother; as the LORD lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you." 20So he said to Jether his firstborn, "Go kill them!" But the boy did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a boy. 21Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "You come and kill us; for as the man is, so is his strength." So Gideon proceeded to kill Zebah and Zalmunna; and he took the crescents that were on the necks of their camels.

22Then the Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian." 23Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over

two bulls, which Gideon sacrifices (6:25-26); they grow wheat at a time when Israelites are impoverished because of the Midianites' incursions; and the oak under which YHWH's messenger appears is identified as belonging to Joash—the oak and the altar to Baal indicating a cultic site of which Joash is head.[19]

Gideon is also well versed in Israel's religious traditions, including God's nearness (the exodus) and God's distance from mortals (prohibition of seeing the Divinity face to face). The messenger greets him as a גבור חיל, "mighty warrior" (6:12), an expression that will also be used of Jephthah and that denotes land management; Gideon's work in the

19. Dietch, *Authority and Violence*, 65, reminds us that these religious activities "would require stores of goods for offerings, such as livestock, flour, oil, and wine, as well as implements and clothing for performing sacrificial duties." See also Yoder, *Power and Politics*, 45–77 on power and knowledge.

you; the LORD will rule over you." [24]Then Gideon said to them, "Let me make a request of you; each of you give me an earring he has taken as booty." (For the enemy had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) [25]"We will willingly give them," they answered. So they spread a garment, and each threw into it an earring he had taken as booty. [26]The weight of the golden earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold (apart from the crescents and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and the collars that were on the necks of their camels). [27]Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his town, in Ophrah; and all Israel prostituted themselves to it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. [28]So Midian was subdued before the Israelites, and they lifted up their heads no more. So the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.

[29]Jerubbaal son of Joash went to live in his own house. [30]Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. [31]His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. [32]Then Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

[33]As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites relapsed and prostituted themselves with the Baals, making Baal-berith their god. [34]The Israelites did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side; [35]and they did not exhibit loyalty to the house of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

winepress would fit this salutation, then.[20] Gideon identifies himself, however, as the youngest from the least of Manasseh's families (6:15).[21] We learn also that Gideon fathered seventy-plus sons, most of whose blood will be spilled. In order to be able to support such a large family, one has to think also of a larger-than-regular household. Of this offspring, three sons are identified. His firstborn, Jether, is ordered to execute the prisoners, but he refuses (8:19-21). Another son, Abimelech, will be the next ruler, and the youngest one, Jotham, will survive Abimelech's crimes and hide from him until eventually disappearing from the story. But we will need to get to chapter 9 to meet them.

20. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzählte Welten im Richterbuch*, BibInt 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 117, and other scholars believe these words will be fulfilled by the end of Gideon's life; others (e.g., Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 171) deem them ironic.

21. For Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 254, this may be an indication that he might not be part of his clan's army.

Gideon's execution of the two Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna (8:18-21), was due to their having killed an unknown number of men from Tabor, of royal appearance and identified by Gideon as "my brothers, the sons of my mother" (8:19).[22] Since intermarriage is often mentioned, Schneider suggests Gideon's mother might have been a Canaanite queen.[23] Regardless of the regal implications of this dialogue between those defeated kings and Gideon, it is clear that his maternal side is held in a certain regard, more important than the paternal lineage. For, as Schneider puts it, "The role of the mother as separating brothers is raised already within Gideon's parentage."[24] Perhaps we should speak rather of the role of patriarchy in using mothers' status to separate brothers. For rivalry between brothers in Gideon's and in Jephthah's families happens in the absence of both father and mothers (and sisters). Unlike Sarah's oppression of Hagar or the rivalry between co-wives, patrilineality, patrimony, and patriarchal values, not mothers, are the ones determining brothers' separation in Judges. Gideon's family is patriarchal, large, and wealthy; like many groups whose cohesive factor is a strong "patriarch" (man or woman), those in the group who claim inheritance from the patriarch, in properties or in control, turn against each other as he loses power (because of death, as in Gideon's story, or because of feebleness, as in David's succession story in 1 Kgs 1–2).

The narrator concentrates on Gideon's male descendants, especially Jotham and Abimelech; we hear nothing about daughters. We hear very little about wives and mothers, just enough to justify different treatment of the seventy sons issued by Gideon and the one son born by an unnamed *pîlegeš*-wife (8:30-31).[25] The scarcity of mothers in Judges has often been

22. Dietch, *Authority and Violence*, 89, notes that here the custom of sparing the captured kings "stands in sharp relief against another, that of the blood vendetta, which takes priority. Thus, the business of group deliverance from invaders and 'foreign' gods continues to recede from view as killing, revenge, and kinship and familial relations loom large upon the scene."

23. Schneider, *Judges*, 124–25.

24. Ibid., 125.

25. Dietch, *Authority and Violence*, 99, notes the difference made by the narrator in the introduction of these seventy-plus-one sons. The term פילגש resists translation efforts. Traditionally it has been understood as "concubine," which is wrong at least in those instances (like Judg 19) in which there is evidence of a marriage of some kind. The evidence suggests a woman in a lower social status than her husband (see, e.g., Gen 25:6); in Gen 35:22, they are the matriarch's slaves given to the patriarch for reproductive purposes, while in the case of Rizpah daughter of Ayah, Saul's *pîlegeš*-

noted.[26] The term "mother" appears twice in Judges 5 (in a symbolic reference to Deborah [v. 7], and in a literal reference to Sisera's mother [v. 28]), and in chapter 8 we hear about Gideon's relatives from his mother's side (8:19). Gideon's many wives and one *pîlegeš*-wife, mothers of his many sons, appear in verses 30-31. In the remaining chapters, Samson's unnamed mother will be mentioned seven times in chapter 14, and Micah's mother will be mentioned six times in Judges 17. Especially notable is the absence of mothers from Judges 1, 11, and 19–21, where daughters and fathers play such a prominent role, chapters that, furthermore, are located at the beginning, the middle point, and the closing of the book.

Another feature in this patriarchal system is that the murder of the rivals, even brothers, is not unthinkable. The narrator records Gideon's command to his firstborn, still under his authority as a נער, "subordinate, boy," to kill the two defeated Midianite kings. This is indeed a very violent imposition on a youngster in order to introduce him to adult male habits of war and violence; there are several other such impositions affecting men and women in gendered, distinct ways, which bring along much suffering and are very hard to break, as gender studies have made clear.[27] Another indicator of the patriarchal system is the total absence

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wife (2 Sam 21:11), or in the case of David (2 Sam 16:21), as in Judg 8:31, there are other children from the father and it is unclear whether they were slaves. In Judg 19:26, the Levite is called "her master" or "lord," אדוניה, thus confirming her lower social, or at least legal, status. The *pîlegeš*-wife arrangement might have provided an alternative for women and men who could not afford a "desirable" marriage because of financial, physical, or other reasons (women with physical hindrances, including previous sexual relationships, poverty that hindered from proper marriage gifts on the woman's or the man's family, etc.). Except for an obscure reference in Ezek 23:20, the term is always applied to females (see, for instance, Song 6:8-9; Esth 2:14). As far as I know, there is no particular jargon that would imply a *pîlegeš*-husband. Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 84-85, takes up an earlier proposal by Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner (*Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* [Leiden: Brill, 1958], 761) and interprets the term פילגש as referring to a woman in a patrilocal or *beenah* marriage, whereby the woman stayed at her father's house and the husband spent periods of time with her there.

26. See Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, particularly 197–230; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York, Schocken Books, 2002), 108.

27. Recall Simone de Beauvoir's dictum with which she opens her book *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier, with an introduction by Judith Thurman [New York: Vintage Ebooks, 2010], 330); see also David A. Bosworth, "David, Jether, and Child Soldiers," *JSOT* 36 (2011): 185–97.

of prominent female characters in the stories of Gideon and his family, which Schneider considers "almost a reaction to the previous story" in which so many women feature prominently.[28]

### *Gideon, the Ephod, and Kingship*

According to Judges 8:27, the ephod Gideon made with the golden crescents from the Midianite spoil became a snare to him and the Israelites—a theme that will resurface as another ephod is made with stolen silver in Judges 17.[29] Request for that spoil and the making of the ephod were part of Gideon's response to the men who offered him and his sons and grandsons to rule over them after he killed the remaining Midianite kings. "The ephod, with its cultic connotations and made of spoils of war, served as a concrete symbol of the true deliverer from Midian. Any discussion of Gideon's ephod detached from the offer of rule misses the point. The importance of the ephod is expressed in its functionality—as a cultic symbol of divine salvation in war and of his exclusive rule."[30]

It is unclear who these men are who approach Gideon in 8:22 or whom they represent. The fact that they each provide a golden earring from the booty indicates they are soldiers. Gideon's response is "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; YHWH will rule over you" (8:23). The verb משל, "to rule," has a negative connotation; it is never used of YHWH's lordship over Israel, and it is mostly employed to denounce wrong claims to power. Yairah Amit notes that the narrative of the making of the ephod is positive, while "8:27b alone constitutes a later addition, reflecting a deviation from the editorial line of this cycle and the adjacent Abimelech cycle. . . . This criticism is inconsistent with the positive atmosphere that accompanies the making of the ephod as a reaction of Gideon to the proposal of king."[31] At the same time, mention of the spoil taken from the necks of the conquered alludes to Sisera's mother in 5:31. "Gideon, whether actually the son of a Canaanite, pos-

28. Schneider, *Judges*, 99.

29. An ephod was a garment worn in cultic activities by certain males, such as Samuel (1 Sam 2:18, 28), David (2 Sam 6:14), or priests (twenty-six times in Exod 28, 29, 35, 39).

30. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 261–62.

31. Ibid., 30; she further notes two divergent interpretations regarding punishment and concludes that this verse differs from the view that it is Abimelech's murder; 8:27b reflects a later editor concerned with cultic objects.

sibly royal woman, or not, was acting precisely as Sisera's mother wanted Sisera to act, as a Canaanite warrior, and how the Israelite deity did not want him to behave."[32] Schneider's observation is strengthened by the fact that the word "neck" appears in Judges only in these two texts (5:31; 8:21, 26). It is no wonder, then, that the ephod is so diversely evaluated by scholars. Those who consider the making of the ephod as a way to respond to the people—"No thanks, not me but the one represented by this reminder will rule over you"—tend to believe in Gideon's honesty.[33] Others see it as a means of divination. In Dietch's view, Gideon proposes a hybrid system, by which Gideon (and his children) will act as YHWH's vice regents; thus, he would not be refusing or taking YHWH's place.[34]

Gideon's and the people's relapsing into practices of idolatry did not happen in one day, and it was probably regarded differently by the different actors. In Judges, many good things can be used wrongly when people are far from YHWH. Sacrifices and vows are not wrong, but they cost Jephthah his daughter. Coming up for war is not only honorable but desired by YHWH (for instance, in Judg 4:6); however, war against their own kindred (Ephraimites, Benjaminites, or the inhabitants of Penuel or Thebez) is not God's plan. Examples are many, but the idea is clear: even if Gideon sets up the ephod as a reminder of YHWH's victory or as a divination device to know YHWH's will, it could (and it did) entrap people.[35] "Cast in an active, feminine role, all Israel 'plays the harlot' with the ephod. In terms of Gideon and his household, however, the narrator's misogynistic bent remains but the language exhibits a reversal. The golden ephod is a snare to the noble family. Cast in a passive role, Gideon and his household are counted among those seduced by the deceptively attractive ephod, not among the seducers."[36] Hypocrisy and ambiguity are not specifically male or female, although they often manifest in gendered ways. What is important here is that Gideon was by no means in the underdog position, even as he was picked by YHWH before he knew it. Perhaps what happened is that he could not make up his own mind as to whether he wanted to be a king or a judge. Jacob

32. Schneider, *Judges*, 126.

33. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 182, thinks that invoking YHWH as king in Gideon's answer would have been too forceful to be a sham. Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzählte Welten im Richterbuch*, 118–19, finds the text ambiguous.

34. Dietch, *Authority and Violence*, 92–94.

35. Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzählte Welten im Richterbuch*, 105.

36. Dietch, *Authority and Violence*, 87.

Wright notes that "the book breaks the natural nexus between military valor and monarchic rule."[37]

A related important concern of the Gideon-Abimelech cycle is Israel's dissatisfaction with YHWH as their only king and with being ruled by judges. While it is debatable whether those Israelites who offered Gideon dynastic rule did so on the basis of his military capacity, his personal characteristics (wealth, ability to speak, authority over his child and others), or his religious purity as a Yahwist, the narrator tells about their offer immediately after Gideon has killed Kings Zebah and Zalmunna (8:15-21). It is also noticeable that the offer is to "you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian," when his son has just demonstrated too much sensitivity to kill those kings as a kind of initiation into manhood (8:20). Furthermore, Gideon is offered kingship after having turned against his own fellow Israelites, although this is not unique of a king, as shown by Jephthah's story and the all-tribes war against Benjamin in chapter 20. In light of these events, it is no wonder that Abimelech would get access to the position by killing his kindred (9:1-6). In order to achieve this, he needed to differentiate himself from his seventy brothers on his father's side. And differentiate himself he did, but in the worst possible way.

### *Abimelech the Abiezrite-Shechemite: Again the "Wrong Mother" Determines Male Fate*

Chapter 9 tells the story of Abimelech's bloody rise to kingship and his shameful fall by the hand of an unnamed woman. It is formed by three units: an account of his accession to power, a fable told by his half-brother Jotham to indicate Abimelech's unsuitability for kingship, and the fulfilment of God's retribution on both him and the Shechemites. Allusions to gods and temples are confusing, and there is no mention of YHWH at all, so that "the style plunges readers into 'non-Israelite' Shechem where there is no interest in Yhwh, and Gideon is known exclu-

37. Jacob L. Wright, "Military Valor and Kingship: A Book-Oriented Approach to the Study of a Major War Theme," in *Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle and Frank Ritchel Ames (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2008), 50. His argument is that in the book of Judges "the judges and saviors do not represent kings on a smaller scale but rather reconfigurations of the monarchic institution. . . . They do not organize professional armies, nor do they radically change the face of Israelite society."

sively by his Baal-inspired name."[38] Dietch allows us to play around the question of belonging to Israel or not: Is Shechem non-Israelite because it is Canaanite, thus making Abimelech a savior like Deborah or Ehud? Or is Abimelech part of YHWH's sending an oppressor to seek Israel's return to YHWH, like the Ammonites or Philistines are said to be? Or is Abimelech non-Israelite because he has no interest in YHWH? If, as many contend, belonging to Israel is a theological program rather than an ethnic belonging, then Shechem is non-Israelite, but then so are all other tribes!

While in verses 23-24 an evil spirit was sent by God to bring discord between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem, in verses 56-57 a different expression is used to explain what has happened to them: "God also made all the wickedness [רעה, 'evil' as direct object] of the people of Shechem fall back [the causative of the verb שוב, 'return, bring back'] on their heads [בראשם]." This expression has only one close parallel, and that is in the story of Nabal's death, where after rejecting David's protection, he sees himself as beneficiary of YHWH's action.[39] Since biblical narrators are usually reluctant to indicate in such a direct manner their moral teachings and since there are so few statements like this one, one wonders why the narrator is so directly involved.[40]

Several scholars have noticed that this story occupies a central position in the book. Irwin sees that before Abimelech there are five judges of peace and after him seven of decline and asks "why his narrative is placed so centrally in Judges and what function it serves in the final form of the book" since "Abimelech has so little in common with the judges of Israel," including the fact that he is a king and not a judge![41] Not only that: nor is Gideon/Jerubbaal said to be a judge![42] Assis, whose

38. Dietch, *Authority and Violence*, 111 and n. 13, in which she explains her use of quotation marks for "non-Israelite" because "the narrative is not entirely clear on the degree of Shechem's assimilation with Israel"; see also Gen 34, where the Shechemites are destroyed by Simeon and Levi because Shechem had taken Jacob's daughter Dinah.

39. The closest parallel is 1 Sam 25:39, in which the same three elements are used in David's interpretation of Nabal's death.

40. Gordon K. Oeste, *Legitimacy, Illegitimacy, and the Right to Rule: Windows on Abimelech's Rise and Demise in Judges 9* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 113, notes the rarity of such a direct statement but does not mention the parallel in 1 Samuel.

41. Brian P. Irwin, "Not Just Any King: Abimelech, the Northern Monarchy, and the Final Form of Judges," *JBL* 131 (2012): 446.

42. Schneider, *Judges*, 130.

focus is on the three central figures (Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah) contrasts Abimelech with his father, noting that he would stop at nothing to become king.[43] A structural analysis of Judges 8:27–9:57 shows how thoughtful the author has been in presenting his or her points. There are four successive scenes, two of which are concentric (ABCC'B'A')—the first and third ones—and two are linear (ABC). The first scene (8:27-34) presents Abimelech within the family structure:

| | |
|---|---|
| vv. 27-28 | A a. Gideon's ephod means "prostitution," a snare for his **house** (בית); |
| | b. the land rested while Gideon LIVED |
| v. 29 | B Jerubbaal "sat" at **home** (בית) |
| v. 30 | C Gideon had seventy sons from several **wives** |
| v. 31 | C' his ***pîlegeš*-wife** gave him one son (Abimelech) |
| v. 32 | B' after a long life, Gideon DIED |
| vv. 33-34 | A' a. Israelites "prostituted themselves"; Ba'al Berit–Elohim |
| | b. they did not deal faithfully with Jerubbaal/Gideon's **house** (בית).[44] |

*Family Determines Abimelech*

The last verses of Judges 8 help us understand Abimelech. His name means "my father is King," implying either a divine or a human subject (Judg 8:31).[45] The formula used indicates a name change (שים, "put, set" and direct object, "his name"). Most translations assume the subject is Gideon (presumably changing a name given to him by his mother at birth), yet in Hebrew it is equally possible that the subject would be

43. Assis, *Self-Interest*, 171–72.

44. Based on an unpublished paper of my own on the whole chapter; see also Jan P. Fokkelman, "Structural Remarks on Judges 9 and 19," in *Sha'rei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 35–36. Bold terms pertain to the semantic realm of family, and underlined terms to the religious realm.

45. Fokkelman, "Structural Remarks," 33–34, shows that "'My father (is) king' is active in at least three levels" in the story. First, in reference to YHWH as Gideon's father/king, then as referring to Gideon as Abimelech's father, and finally as referring to both fathers, one of which will eventually bring Abimelech's kingship to its end.

Abimelech himself.[46] Scholars stress the name giver's arrogance because of the allusion to kingship.

While Gideon is also Jerubbaal (in chapter 9 he is only called Jerubbaal) and Abimelech at some point had a name change, the woman who bore Abimelech is nameless. She is identified only as Gideon's *pîlegeš*-wife, located at Shechem (8:31). Throughout chapter 9, Shechem's importance will be evidenced in data such as its elders' power to fetch a group of mercenaries to support Abimelech; in its two temples, at least one of which (to Baal-Berith) becomes prominent for Israel as soon as Gideon died (8:33); and in the symbolic importance of proclaiming oneself its king: nobody wants to be a king of nowhere! On the other hand, there is a long story behind its name (as well as Hamor's name, alluded to by Gaal in 9:28), which points to servitude and broken covenants, rather than importance and power. As Amy Pfeister states, had they known their own history, perhaps another end would have been possible for this one.[47]

There are many questions we cannot answer: Is Abimelech's mother still alive as he takes power? Did she ever live with Gideon in Ophrah? The term פילגש is unclear,[48] but at least where other wives are included, it signals lower status (e.g., Gen 25:6; Song 6:8-9). A פילגש "was a woman whose continued presence within the family was not dependent upon economic arrangements. Typically, a concubine was a secondary wife, whose involvement with the husband represented a secondary union, both in terms of being an additional wife and of having a lower status than the legal wife."[49] A second hint about this woman's possible status comes from Jotham's speech. In verse 18 he refers to Abimelech as the son of Gideon's slave or handmaid, בן־אמתו, a derisive naming, highlighted by his body language: he speaks from on high. Even if it were true that Gideon's *pîlegeš*-wife was a slave, Jotham's statement has a purpose, namely, to stress the distance between the seventy brothers and

46. Schneider, *Judges*, 129–30. On this name formula, see Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, AB 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 170.

47. Amy Balogh (Pfeister), "'He Is Our Brother': Shechem's Covenant History and the Story of Abimelech (Judges 8:30–9:57)," paper presented at the SBL Annual Meeting, Hebrew Bible, History, and Archaeology Session, November 21, 2011, https://udenver.academia.edu/ABalogh.

48. See n. 25 above.

49. Naomi Steinberg, "Social Scientific Criticism: Judges 9 and Issues of Kinship," in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 51.

Abimelek.[50] The narrator is intentional on this point, since everyone assumes this difference between Israel and Shechem. Much more difficult is to discern whether the difference is ethnic (Israelite versus Canaanite), cultural (urban versus rural), political (tribal versus city-state mind), geographical (a fortified city versus a tribe's territory), or religious (YHWH followers versus Baal-Berith followers)—or all of these. At any rate, Gideon's *pîlegeš*–wife seems not to have belonged to the lower class, not to have been a slave woman, since she seems to have been able to live on her own (and support herself and her son?) and was influential enough, at least with her family at Shechem, to carry on Abimelek's request for kingship based on his kinship.

## Accession to Kingship through Maternal Kinship (9:1-48)

Chapter 9 starts with a geographical and strategic move by Abimelech: he went to Shechem, "to the brothers of his mother, and spoke to them and to the whole family of the paternal house of his mother" in order to get their support (9:1).[51] The way in which he presents the option is very telling: "Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that only one of them (who is also your kin) rules over you?" The Shechemites choose one who is their brother over the seventy from another "people," and they give him seventy pieces of silver from the Baal-berith ("Lord of the Covenant") temple to seal the deal—the temple of a deity whom, according to 8:33, Israel worships. This is a power struggle between different *baʿals* over Israel's allegiance, and this happens at a place where, under Joshua, Israel had made a ברית, a covenant, with YHWH (Josh 24).[52]

Although the question put by Abimelech (what is the best leadership for Israel) is in itself important in Judges, in fact the rhetorical question seeks Israel's support for a coup d'etat; for what other way of setting the issue could they think of when they give him the same number of silver pieces as the number of competitors to be eliminated? One piece of silver

50. I have dealt with the literal and figurative (ideological) uses of the terms for "slave" in my book *Women at Work in the Deuteronomistic History* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 115–60; here, I rely on my comments therein (149–52).

51. Hebrew is obscure. Schneider, *Judges*, 134, takes the word אבי as noun + suffix rather than construct ("the whole family of the house of 'my father his mother'").

52. Thomas A. Boogaart, "Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem," *JSOT* 32 (1985): 54–55, has noted that Jotham's curse—a term used by the text itself—does not come out of the fable itself but it is a product of the treaty between Shechem and Abimelech.

*Judges 9:1-48*

9:1Now Abimelech son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's kinsfolk and said to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family, 2"Say in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?' Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh." 3So his mother's kinsfolk spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem; and their hearts inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." 4They gave him seventy pieces of silver out of the temple of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, who followed him. 5He went to his father's house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone; but Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubbaal, survived, for he hid himself. 6Then all the lords of Shechem and all Beth-millo came together, and they went and made Abimelech king, by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.

7When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and cried aloud and said to them, "Listen to me, you lords of Shechem, so that God may listen to you.

8The trees once went out
to anoint a king over
themselves.
So they said to the olive tree,
'Reign over us.'

for each man to be killed. There is more at stake here than either judge or king. As Pressler notes, however, "The kin-based tribal system typical of Israel is set in direct conflict with Shechem's mode as a city run by a group of officials supported by temple officiants and a militia (Beth-Millo). . . . Abimelek will eventually treat them just as he treats his brothers—slaughtering them all."[53] Slaughtering of brothers is his trademark!

A detailed analysis of the chapter would lead us too far into issues of violence and war;[54] furthermore, there are in it many loose ends, as befits a parable.[55] Thus, we move on to the agent of Abimelech's demise, where we find yet another nameless woman, who will become very important.

53. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 185.

54. Dietch, *Authority and Violence*, 150, notes that the term חמס, "violence or wrong," is uncommon in prose texts. In Judges, it appears only in 9:24.

55. According to Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers, Year A: The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 3, "The term 'parable' covers a wide range of figurative speech: similitudes, extended metaphors, symbolic expressions, exemplary and true-to-life stories." They have a sharp, unsettling edge, "usually having an unexpected twist that left the hearers pondering what the story meant and what it demanded" (7).

*Judges 9:1-48 (cont.)*

9The olive tree answered them,
'Shall I stop producing my rich oil
by which gods and mortals are
honored,
and go to sway over the trees?'
10Then the trees said to the fig tree,
'You come and reign over us.'
11But the fig tree answered them,
'Shall I stop producing my
sweetness
and my delicious fruit,
and go to sway over the trees?'
12Then the trees said to the vine,
'You come and reign over us.'
13But the vine said to them,
'Shall I stop producing my wine
that cheers gods and mortals,
and go to sway over the trees?'
14So all the trees said to the
bramble,
'You come and reign over us.'
15And the bramble said to the trees,
'If in good faith you are anointing
me king over you,
then come and take refuge in
my shade;
but if not, let fire come out of the
bramble
and devour the cedars of
Lebanon.'

16"Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and honor when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done to him as his actions deserved—17for my father fought for you, and risked his life, and rescued you from the hand of Midian; 18but you have risen up against my father's house this day, and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his slave woman, king over the lords of Shechem, because he is your kinsman—19if, I say, you have acted in good faith and honor with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you; 20but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the lords of Shechem, and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the lords of Shechem, and from Beth-millo, and devour Abimelech." 21Then Jotham ran away and fled, going to Beer, where he remained for fear of his brother Abimelech.

22Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. 23But God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the lords of Shechem; and the lords of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. 24This happened so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might be avenged and their blood be laid on their bother Abimelech, who killed them, and on the lords of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers. 25So, out of hostility to him, the lords of Shechem set ambushes on the mountain tops. They robbed all who passed by them along that way; and it was reported to Abimelech.

26When Gaal son of Ebed moved into Shechem with his kinsfolk, the lords of Shechem put confidence in him. 27They went out into the field and gathered the grapes from their vineyards, trod them, and celebrated. Then they went into the temple of their god, ate and drank, and ridiculed Abimelech. 28Gaal son of Ebed said, "Who is Abimelech, and who are we of

Shechem, that we should serve him? Did not the son of Jerubbaal and Zebul his officer serve the men of Hamor father of Shechem? Why then should we serve him? [29]If only this people were under my command! Then I would remove Abimelech; I would say to him, 'Increase your army, and come out.'"

[30]When Zebul the ruler of the city heard the words of Gaal son of Ebed, his anger was kindled. [31]He sent messengers to Abimelech at Arumah, saying, "Look, Gaal son of Ebed and his kinsfolk have come to Shechem, and they are stirring up the city against you. [32]Now therefore, go by night, you and the troops that are with you, and lie in wait in the fields. [33]Then early in the morning, as soon as the sun rises, get up and rush on the city; and when he and the troops that are with him come out against you, you may deal with them as best you can."

[34]So Abimelech and all the troops with him got up by night and lay in wait against Shechem in four companies. [35]When Gaal son of Ebed went out and stood in the entrance of the gate of the city, Abimelech and the troops with him rose from the ambush. [36]And when Gaal saw them, he said to Zebul, "Look, people are coming down from the mountain tops!" And Zebul said to him, "The shadows on the mountains look like people to you." [37]Gaal spoke again and said, "Look, people are coming down from Tabbur-erez, and one company is coming from the direction of Elon-meonenim." [38]Then Zebul said to him, "Where is your boast now, you who said, 'Who is Abimelech, that we should serve him?' Are not these the troops you made light of? Go out now and fight with them." [39]So Gaal went out at the head of the lords of Shechem, and fought with Abimelech. [40]Abimelech chased him, and he fled before him. Many fell wounded, up to the entrance of the gate. [41]So Abimelech resided at Arumah; and Zebul drove out Gaal and his kinsfolk, so that they could not live on at Shechem.

[42]On the following day the people went out into the fields. When Abimelech was told, [43]he took his troops and divided them into three companies, and lay in wait in the fields. When he looked and saw the people coming out of the city, he rose against them and killed them. [44]Abimelech and the company that was with him rushed forward and stood at the entrance of the gate of the city, while the two companies rushed on all who were in the fields and killed them. [45]Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city, and killed the people that were in it; and he razed the city and sowed it with salt.

[46]When all the lords of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the temple at El-berith. [47]Abimelech was told that all the lords of the Tower of Shechem were gathered together. [48]So Abimelech went up to Mount Zalmon, he and all the troops that were with him. Abimelech took an ax in his hand, cut down a bundle of brushwood, and took it up and laid it on his shoulder. Then he said to the troops with him, "What you have seen me do, do quickly, as I have done."

## Abimelech Unmanned by an Unnamed Woman (9:49-57)

The end of Villain Abimelech is recounted in 9:49-57. According to the fable in 9:8-13, fire would come out of the bramble and consume the (productive) trees because they have not chosen the bramble in good faith. Judges 9:49 recounts how, after destroying Shechem, Abimelech and the people who followed him set on fire the tower of Shechem and killed a thousand women and men who had taken refuge there. To be noted is women's mention here, since usually a plural masculine noun is taken to include everyone. Abimelech's last goal was Thebez, where the people also sought refuge at its tower.

The text never tells us why Abimelech came against Thebez, since it had not been mentioned earlier. While the text moves to the next battle, it is worth noting that here women, children, and slaves are counted together with their male heads of household, for they had surely not chosen Abimelech over Gideon's other sons. As in so many stories in Judges and elsewhere, women (and other subordinated people) are made responsible for decisions they did not make and are often pawns in a game they did not choose to play and they will not win. "There are a number of different types of leaders in this story, but none of them protected the people of the city since they were all concerned with their own well-being. Their own personal well-being was what led them to make choices that led to the destruction of the city."[56] Despite Jotham's fable, Abimelech will not die by fire or by the Shechemites' hand. There is here a broader scenario than the one foreseen in Jotham's fable; perhaps his enlisting Elohim in the curse is the reason.

By attempting his same strategy of setting the tower on fire, Abimelech made a deadly mistake, a mistake well taken advantage of by an unnamed woman. As he came close to the tower's entrance, one woman threw a millstone from the top of the tower against his head and cracked it (v. 53). "The millstone that crashes the tyrant's head (ראש) itself marks the end of a decreasing series of numbers."[57] One may note the parallel between the stone on which Abimelech killed seventy brothers and his being killed by one stone. Also notable is the use of "head" throughout the chapter. Ken Stone calls attention to the use of a different, much

56. Schneider, *Judges*, 146. In particular, Judg 11, 13, and 19–21 speak of women, children, and other "civilians" killed or raped because the males responsible for them neglected them.

57. Fokkelman, "Structural Remarks," 39; he also notes the decrease in numbers.

*Judges 9:49-57*

49So every one of the troops cut down
a bundle and following Abimelech put
it against the stronghold, and they
set the stronghold on fire over them,
so that all the people of the Tower of
Shechem also died, about a thousand
men and women.
50Then Abimelech went to The-
bez, and encamped against Thebez,
and took it. 51But there was a strong
tower within the city, and all the men
and women and all the lords of the
city fled to it and shut themselves in;
and they went to the roof of the tower.
52Abimelech came to the tower, and
fought against it, and came near to the
entrance of the tower to burn it with
fire. 53But a certain woman threw an
upper millstone on Abimelech's head,
and crushed his skull. 54Immediately he
called to the young man who carried
his armor and said to him, "Draw your
sword and kill me, so people will not
say about me, 'A woman killed him.'"
So the young man thrust him through,
and he died. 55When the Israelites saw
that Abimelech was dead, they all went
home. 56Thus God repaid Abimelech
for the crime he committed against his
father in killing his seventy brothers;
57and God also made all the wicked-
ness of the people of Shechem fall
back on their heads, and on them came
the curse of Jotham son of Jerubbaal.

more precise word to refer to the stone thrown by this unnamed woman from the top of the tower.[58] It is not just one stone, but a "riding-stone," פלח רכב, the stone that rotated on the lower, fixed stone, in order to mill the grain. How and why the stone got on top of the tower is never stated and it does not really matter, for its importance is more symbolic than literal. This is gendered poetic justice! Because he turned to his mother's clan rather than his father's, his fate was sealed by a woman; moreover, the millstone is an everyday female tool. Furthermore, Abimelech's last words show that there is an added gendered shame in being killed by a woman; he calls on his armor-bearer and asks him to draw his sword and kill him, so people would not say that he was killed by a woman (v. 54). To no avail, sorry to say: the only other reference to Abimelech in the Bible belittles him for being killed by the hand of a woman (2 Sam 11:21).

58. Ken Stone, "How a Woman Unmans a King: Gender Reversal and the Woman of Thebez in Judges 9," in *From the Margins*, vol. 1: *Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 76. See also idem, "Gender Criticism: The Unmanning of Abimelek" in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 183–201.

It is notable that Abimelech's violence is directed primarily against his father, not only by killing his children, but by rejecting his paternal line and seeking support from his maternal lineage. Dietch points out that Abimelech is publicly stoned, thus fulfilling the legal requirement on the disobedient son in Deuteronomy 21:21, whose shameful behavior reflects on his whole household.[59]

As we consider the son's dishonor of the "house of the father" and his cruelty and murder, for which there is no defense, one has to regard the patriarchal system of which he was part, which set Abimelech in a secondary social position because of his mother. After all, if the father sets the lineage, why is the mother so important? Why are children set one against the other, first sons against daughters, then sons from the right mother against the other/s? Compartmentalization is deceiving and divisive, and it serves those who hold control. This is not to applaud Abimelech's behavior but just to have a broader picture. Though not the only ones to be compartmentalized to their harm, women find ourselves categorized, and often perpetuate compartmentalization such as good women–bad women. Abimelech's mother happened to be on the bad side of the equation and so was her son.

***Jael and the Woman of Thebez: Battle Axes or Peace Brokers?***

The women of Judges have been identified on various levels as either active or passive participants in the endless acts of violence and war that permeate the book. When characterized as objects of violence, women are regarded as spoils of war (maidens for Sisera's soldiers, virgins from Jabesh Gilead, daughters of Shiloh), victims of rape (Levite's concubine), or "valuable items of exchange" (Achsah, Jephthah's daughter).[60] Some women also trigger conflicts in life or in death (Samson's Timnite wife; Levite's concubine), and as close relations to male warriors, several women are concubines or mistresses (Samson's women, Gideon's concubine) while others are simply mothers (Sisera's, Abimelech's, Jephthah's, Samson's), who play only passive roles in most cases. Women are not, however, just victims or villains; some are seen

59. Dietch, *Authority and Violence*, 181, alluding to Anselm C. Hagedorn, "Guarding the Parents' Honour—Deuteronomy 21.18-21," *JSOT* 88 (2000): 115.

60. Niditch, *Judges*, 4.

as military heroes who help to disarm male warriors through manipulation (Samson's Timnite wife; Delilah), who slay male warriors to secure victory for Israel (Jael; woman of Thebez), and who command battles (Deborah).

A cursory look at the violent actions of two women—Jael and the woman of Thebez—who both slay notable warriors (Judg 4:17-24 and 9:50-57) could portray them as devious and cold-blooded murderers. Without consulting or conspiring with any man, Jael the Kenite singlehandedly lures Sisera into her tent and assassinates him in his sleep. Her action terminates twenty years of Canaanite oppression and launches a forty-year era of peace in ancient Israel. The quick-thinking action of the woman of Thebez who is trapped in a strong tower together with all the men and women of the city saves the entire city. Before Abimelech could burn down the tower, this unnamed woman throws an upper millstone on his head, crushing his skull. He calls on a young soldier to thrust him through with a sword, but he would have died from the wounds of the millstone anyway (2 Sam 11:21). Abimelech's death at the hands of the woman effectively ends the civil war that pitched Shechem against the rest of Israel, and forty-five years of peace follow.

Although women are found to be more peace-loving than men and often act as peacemakers in conflict situations (2 Sam 14:1-20; 20:14-22), they also "play a role in maintaining the war system and in transmitting cultural values that make wars more likely, and can themselves sometimes be quite violent."[61] Can it be said therefore that Jael and the Thebez woman set out to kill their victims? At second glance, it appears that the goal of these two unrelated women who both act spontaneously in crisis is not to perpetuate violence but to stop bloodshed in their territories and broker peace (e.g., Deborah). In the context of the book of Judges, even other women who through manipulation disarm strong warriors do so to put an end to terror and usher in peace. No doubt, violence tends to lead to more violence, but sometimes, when other interventions fail, violence in the right hands may be used to induce peace, as these two ordinary women have done.

*Funlola O. Olojede*

61. G. Elizabeth Ferris, "Women as Peacemakers," in *Women, Violence and Non-Violent Change*, ed. Musimbi Kanyoro and Lucia Ann McSpadden (Geneva: WCC, 1996), 7.

Because Abimelech chose his mother's lineage, the female's rather than the male's side, a woman will bring about his death. There are several hints in the text that point to the ever-present fear of being unmanned by a woman. Ken Stone notes that Abimelech's killing, like Sisera's, "involve[s] not only death at the hands of women, but also a kind of spatial gender reversal, which might even be said to 'queer' the scene of death through the 'insertion' (to use again Bourdieu's word) of male warriors beneath in the penetrated position and women up above in the role of aggressive penetrator, the role of the top, normatively reserved for men."[62] Abimelech is unmanned by an unnamed woman who happened to take along the only weapon she could: her grinder. Not only is she not a soldier and not a man, but she is probably a poor woman, since Deuteronomy 24:6 lists millstones as so indispensable that they may not be taken as pawn—and what would a woman from the elite be doing, up on the tower, with a millstone?[63]

Despite Abimelech's last effort, the woman saves the city from its villain, even though she is not identified as a judge or a savior. As Cristina García-Alfonso explains (see her Contributing Voice above on Jael), sometimes one gets to do what has to be done with whatever is at hand, out of sheer need, not out of a moral or ethical conviction. And if that is unmanning a warrior, so be it!

And who can blame the man who feels threatened, after he has witnessed Ehud's attack on Eglon, Jael's phallus-like tent peg on Sisera's mouth, and now a grinding stone, coming from above and rendering the warrior useless, dying, and felled by a woman? Who can blame a man who buys into this patriarchal binary system and fears losing his relatively privileged position and becoming a woman! In a world where every human being were regarded as worthy as anybody else, nobody would have to choose his or her patrilineage over her or his matrilineage, for both would be important for personal identity. In a world where every human being were regarded as worthy as anybody else, nobody would have to live with the fear of becoming a woman, of being ruled by women (Isa 3:12), or even of losing oneself in love for a woman (a theme to be discussed below, as Samson chooses love over life). But that is not the world of Judges. Neither is it our world. Otherwise we would need no feminist commentary!

62. Stone, "How a Woman Unmans a King," 79.

63. Schneider, *Judges*, 148, notes the irony in that the millstone would normally be a means of livelihood, not death.

# Judges 10:1–12:15

## *Other Judges, Other Stories*

The stories of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, and one short notice about Shamgar have given readers a sense of how a society can seek YHWH's favor and work under YHWH's Spirit as one people, even without a leader like Joshua or a king. Judges wishes to "explain the course of history as an interaction between God and the people. This is conducted by means of signs, which are a system of direct or indirect signals which the people receive from God, indicative of His [*sic*] guiding intervention in the course of events."[1] Male and female saviors and leaders have not sufficed for the people to remain in that exclusive relationship. Worship of the Baals and other local deities, divination through an ephod, and disregard for YHWH's commandments and vision for Israel call for recalculation of their way of living. Will Israel be able to do so, now that it has also learned that monarchic power is no solution when accompanied by bloodbath and too much silver? No, unfortunately. As the narration proceeds, things will worsen to the point where there will be no more seeking YHWH or only seeking the answer they want to hear; Israelite saviors will mingle with oppressors (Abimelech is the most obvious example, but the narrator indicts

1. Yairah Amit, *The Book of the Judges: The Art of Editing*, BibInt 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 27.

many men for having married women from the land, bringing idolatry to Israel), and differences among tribes will lead to open conflict, threats, war, and destruction of whole regions. The idyllic relationship between Israel and its deity will deteriorate to utter chaos.

## Tola the Son of Puah (No Mother Named), Grandson of Dodo (No Grandmother Named), from the Tribe of Issachar (10:1-2)

Chapter 10 opens with two short notices about the judges who next arose. First is Tola, whose ancestors were Puah and Dodo, from the tribe of Issachar, who lived in the hill country of Ephraim (not his tribe's land). Ephraim produces some very interesting characters in Judges: Ehud was from Ephraim (3:15); Deborah used to sit to judge under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel (4:5); Gideon had called on the men of Ephraim to fight against the Midianites (7:24); and later in the book, Jephthah will fight Ephraim, inflicting forty-two thousand deaths (12:1-6). Thus, in Judges, this area is much more than the remote place where nameless Levites would settle, according to the dark stories of Judges 17–21.

Tammi Schneider notes how little attention scholarship has paid to the fact that Tola's father and grandfather are named. Right or wrong ancestry and claim to inherited rule and land according to those ancestries are central issues in several stories, particularly in those immediately before Tola's rise.[2] It is also said that Tola arose (ויקם), in contrast to Othniel and Ehud, for example, whom YHWH raised (the causative of קום is used only three times in Judges, in 2:16; 3:9, 15). When Tola "arose to save Israel" after Abimelech's disaster, it is hard to say whether "he arose" is a positive or a negative comment; there is no indication of YHWH's pleasure or displeasure of him. In fact, there is no mention of YHWH's Spirit coming upon him or choosing him in any other way either.

The last two notices about Tola are typical formulas, one about the length of his rule as judge (twenty-three years) and the other about his burial place, which is the same place where he had lived, Shamir of Ephraim (10:2).

2. Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges: A Commentary*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 154–55.

*Judges 10:1-2*

10:1After Abimelech, Tola son of Puah son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, who lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim, rose to deliver Israel. 2He judged Israel twenty-three years. Then he died, and was buried at Shamir.

## Jair, a Gileadite without Wife, Parents, or Daughters (10:3-5)

Of Jair there is truly little said. He judged Israel twenty-two years. Like his predecessor, "he arose," but there is no mention of a savior here. The only relatives mentioned are his thirty sons (no wife, wives, or parents).

Although he is without ancestors or patronymic, he comes from a religiously important place, Gilead; Jephthah will be the next judge from that same region. Jair controlled thirty boroughs in the region through his thirty sons' agency. Their riding on donkeys indicates prestige and wealth; moreover, the intertextual connections of this Manassite group with one of David's twelve officials (see reference to Jair in 1 Kgs 4:13) hints at "a new ruling family," at least prospectively.[3]

**TRANSLATION MATTERS**

In some versions there is a wordplay between עירים, "burros, asses," and ערים, "boroughs, cities," based on a revocalization of the second term, which in the MT appears exactly as the first one.

## Once Again, Lust after Other Gods Leads to Oppression (10:6-18)

Judges 10:6-18 depicts yet another breach in Israel's relationship to YHWH. Verse 6 seems to be a summary report. The seven deities worshiped by Israel negatively balance the seven acts of deliverance by YHWH mentioned in verses 11-12.[4] As indicated in chapter 2, when

3. Ibid., 156–57.

4. Judg 10:11-12 are syntactically problematic; there could be an *anacoluthon* or an *ellipsis* in God's accusation; see Carlos R. Sosa, "Cuando la paciencia del Señor se colma: Análisis exegético de Jueces 10:11-16," *Kairós* 45 (2009): 16–17. On the weight of the Ammonite oppression and God's refusal to send a deliverer, see also Elie Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal Interest? An Ideology of Leadership in the Gideon, Abimelech and Jephthah Narratives (Judg. 6–12)*, VTSup 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 175–91.

*Judges 10:3-5*

[3]After him came Jair the Gileadite, who judged Israel twenty-two years. [4]He had thirty sons who rode on thirty donkeys; and they had thirty towns, which are in the land of Gilead, and are called Havvoth-jair to this day. [5]Jair died, and was buried in Kamon.

Israel leaves their God, God abandons Israel. When Israel worships with its neighbors, it becomes like them.[5] The question of identity surfaces here again, because it is determinative in Jephthah's life, not only in his life, but in the massacre of the Ephraimites with which his rule as judge is connected (12:1-6). Thus, when one wonders how this relationship between YHWH and Israel will further develop, one may foresee, at least, the pattern established so far by the book: foreign oppression over Israel, outcry, and the rise of a deliverer may be expected. This time there is repentance (10:15-16). It is unclear whether the expression ותקצר נפשו ("he could no longer bear to see," v. 16b) is to produce a positive or a negative response toward Israel, an ambiguity that is actually never resolved.[6] As a result of this ambiguity, there is no judge or savior raised until after a long while.

## There Finally Is a Judge: Jephthah (11:1–12:7)

In an illuminating study of three sacrifice narratives in the Bible (Gen 22 and Judg 11 and 19), Vicki Jensen notes the tensions and ambiguities in Joshua and Judges as the promises made to Abraham and his family begin to be fulfilled. One of those ambiguities is particularly evident in

5. David Janzen, "Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter," *JSOT* 29 (2005): 334, wonders why the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter is mentioned when Israel was forbidden human sacrifice and notes that it "reflects Dtr's most important theological motif: when Israel worships like foreigners, it will act like foreigners."

6. The expression may denote the impatience of a situation no longer bearable (as Samson being nagged by Delilah in 16:16 or Israel in the desert, Num 21:4); see Assis, *Self-Interest*, 183-84 and n. 12 on different proposals and their difficulties; Michael Sjöberg (*Wrestling with Textual Violence: The Jephthah Narrative in Antiquity and Modernity*, Bible in the Modern World 4 [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006], 32) notes that while Jephthah's victory is an improvement of the initial situation, his lack of descent is a deteriorating action.

*Judges 10:6-18*

6The Israelites again did what was
evil in the sight of the Lord, worship-
ing the Baals and the Astartes, the
gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the
gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammo-
nites, and the gods of the Philistines.
Thus they abandoned the Lord, and
did not worship him. 7So the anger of
the Lord was kindled against Israel,
and he sold them into the hand of the
Philistines and into the hand of the
Ammonites, 8and they crushed and
oppressed the Israelites that year. For
eighteen years they oppressed all the
Israelites that were beyond the Jordan
in the land of the Amorites, which is in
Gilead. 9The Ammonites also crossed
the Jordan to fight against Judah and
against Benjamin and against the
house of Ephraim; so that Israel was
greatly distressed.

10So the Israelites cried to the Lord,
saying, "We have sinned against you,
because we have abandoned our God
and have worshiped the Baals." 11And
the Lord said to the Israelites, "Did I
not deliver you from the Egyptians and
from the Amorites, from the Ammonites
and from the Philistines? 12The Sido-
nians also, and the Amalekites, and
the Maonites, oppressed you; and you
cried to me, and I delivered you out of
their hand. 13Yet you have abandoned
me and worshiped other gods; there-
fore I will deliver you no more. 14Go
and cry to the gods whom you have
chosen; let them deliver you in the time
of your distress." 15And the Israelites
said to the Lord, "We have sinned; do
to us whatever seems good to you; but
deliver us this day!" 16So they put away
the foreign gods from among them and
worshiped the Lord; and he could no
longer bear to see Israel suffer.

17Then the Ammonites were called
to arms, and they encamped in Gilead;
and the Israelites came together, and
they encamped at Mizpah. 18The com-
manders of the people of Gilead said to
one another, "Who will begin the fight
against the Ammonites? He shall be
head over all the inhabitants of Gilead."

these chapters, namely, that of the people's self-identity in their land. "The obviously artificial opposition of land of promise/Canaan—the land of promise *is* Canaan—serves to draw attention to the problematic character of the other oppositions," and oppositions are myriad in this story.[7] Class (Jephthah's low origins vis-à-vis his brothers), inter-ethnic (Israelite versus Ammonite), inter-tribal (Gileadite versus Transjordanian; Ephraimite versus Gileadite), gender (particularly, but not only, that of Jephthah and his daughter), and religious oppositions (YHWH versus

7. Vicki K. Jensen, "Judging Moriah: Gendered Narratives of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible," (MA thesis, Wichita State University, 2006), 62, available at: http://soar.wichita.edu/handle/10057/1218.

other deities) produce a complex and sad story with equally complex messages. Jephthah is also a man of his time: in a nonpatriarchal system no man would have had the authority to offer his daughter or throw out his wife to a mob; decisions would have been negotiated. The whole life of Jephthah may be seen as a series of unfortunate oppositions leading him sometimes to compromises and other times to violent conflicts.

As the context is presented in Judges 10:6-18, the introduction of Jephthah is delayed. This delay may be seen also as a device to highlight Jephthah's importance or rather to ignore him, just as his own kin long ignored him (more than ignored, despised him). The story is a masterpiece, particularly because it leaves so many obscure corners that it is not possible for all readers to come to accord as to its meaning. While for feminists the vow is more significant than other aspects, there are also obscurities about the report of Jephthah's return, the dialogue with his daughter, the epilogue, and the further report on the war against Ephraim. While it is very difficult to comment on so ambiguous a text without making hermeneutical decisions, the attempt is worth the effort, since the author offers us such a hermeneutical goldmine.

Although for feminist studies the figure and the fate of Jephthah's daughter are central, her story is part and parcel of his and cannot be taken independently from her father's fate and figure. The dynamics of settlement and identity-seeking are larger than Jephthah as well. Furthermore, one does well to remember that what we read is a narrative, not a real-time video showing us "what happens" (in case a video were 100 percent objective); it is a narrative with its ideological interests, as any other narrative. Unfortunately, this does not mean that it is only fiction: children and adults are sacrificed still today as sexual objects, war casualties, or economic slaves. Finally, while the Judges story itself is ambiguous about Jephthah's character and vow (it avoids any negative statement along the lines of "what he did displeased YHWH," while it shows him as a person with insecurities), 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32 portray him positively as a deliverer supported by God and as a man of faith.[8]

Since there is so much written on this text, I will try to sketch Jephthah's rule looking at his different encounters, some of which are more violent

8. J. Cheryl Exum, *Was sagt das Richterbuch den Frauen?* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1997), 36. Hebrews 11 ignores Deborah, so its own parameters for being a paradigm of faith should be subject to scrutiny.

than others.[9] With artistry, the narrator brings us back to Jephthah's earlier years, when he was still a member of the Gileadite community, and explains why they sought him as the likeliest candidate to take them out of the Midianites' hands.

*Jephthah's Low Social Status because of His Mother (11:1-3)*

Judges 11 starts by introducing Jephthah, whose name means "he opens" or "may he open," as:

- a Gileadite (v. 1)
- the son of Gilead (v. 1)
- a mighty warrior/a man of means (v. 1)
- the son of a prostitute/fornicator (v. 1) and/or the son of another woman (v. 2)
- a man whom his half-brothers expelled from the paternal estate, so that he would not inherit with them (v. 2)
- a man who appears not to have had support from his mother's family (unless they dwelt in Tob, but the text does not mention them) for, unlike Abimelech, he does not seek their support or ask to be their king (v. 3)
- a man who gathered around him a group of "empty" men, who "went out" with him, presumably to find some means of supporting themselves (v. 3) after losing access to land

This is a lot of information for only three verses and this in itself is an important detail. The information conveyed about Jephthah is, however, by no means univocal. The meaning of his name is clear, but what it may allude to is not. More interesting is the identity of his father. Although he is said to have been fathered by Gilead, Gilead is an eponym for a subtribe or region (notice that his burial place is again very general, "the towns of Gilead," 12:7).

The next information provided by the narrator is that he was a גבור חיל, a mighty man. This is also a difficult expression. According to Michael Sjöberg, the combination of both terms appears in the Dtr only in refer-

9. Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, 51–52, speaks of confrontations; some of them include negotiations.

*Judges 11:1-3*

11:1Now Jephthah the Gileadite, the son of a prostitute, was a mighty warrior. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. 2Gilead's wife also bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah away, saying to him, "You shall not inherit anything in our father's house; for you are the son of another woman." 3Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Outlaws collected around Jephthah and went raiding with him.

ence to judges Gideon and Jephthah; kings David and Jeroboam; Naaman the Syrian general; and Kish, Saul's father.[10] Although it is generally understood to mean a valiant warrior, Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger states that this expression refers to a man (father or older brother) already established in a landed property, with socio-economic and organizational responsibilities.[11] This means that Jephthah was expelled when already established as a worthy man in Gilead; he may be understood as the embodiment of "the Hebrew ideal of a man: talented, pious, and good at talking; a man greatly valued by his community."[12]

"But/and," the narrator continues, "he was the son of an anonymous אשה זונה." The term זונה is usually translated "a prostitute," but see his brothers' reference to her as אשה אחרת, (an)other woman (v. 2).[13] One gets a sense of how complex family relations became when the patriarch was absent and the mother was suspect. For even if Gilead were an individual and not "anyone in the territory of Gilead," he does not intervene in the conflict between his sons from one woman and the other

10. Ibid., 51–52.

11. Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger, *Stadt und Eidgenossenschaft im Alten Testament*, BZAW 156 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1983), 313–15, 320–21. Comparing איש חיל, בן חיל, and גבור חיל, she states that the latter was an איש חיל who became "promoted" (*abgehoben*) into the landed society (quoted by Renate Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht in der Anthropologie des Richterbuches* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006], 169).

12. Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 170. Cf. Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 207, who contrasts Gideon's and Jephthah's increasing distance from YHWH.

13. Dolores G. Kamrada "'Stranger to One Another': The Motif of Strangeness in the Jephthah Cycle," in *The Stranger in Ancient and Mediaeval Jewish Tradition: Papers Read at the First Meeting of the Society of Jewish and Biblical Studies in Central Europe, Piliscsaba, 2009*, ed. Géza Xeravits and Jan Dušek (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 18–20.

woman.[14] Although the text says nothing about Gilead's situation, I think he had already died, leaving behind a fierce competition for his properties (although there are also biblical stories of family members fighting during the patriarch's lifetime for inheritance rights, such as Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and David's children). David Marcus notes legal terminology behind the words of the text and argues for an adoption deed by Gilead later contested by the other sons. They would have brought the issue to the town's elders, who would have accepted their contention, declared void the adoption deed, and thus been responsible for Jephthah's expulsion from his family's estate.[15]

While commentaries tend to see these fights as petty (especially when the respective mothers fight for their children), the patriarchal system is to be blamed for setting one child over the other and one mother against another. Inheritance rights run from father to son/s (exceptionally, daughter/s), but the legitimacy of children is determined by the mother's pedigree and status. Thus, there is much more at stake here than just a fight between siblings for the inheritance of land; there is the issue of the identity and status of Gilead's wives and their children. Regarding Jephthah's mother, the traditional rendition of זונה as prostitute has been contested by some scholars, especially in those texts where paternity of the mother's child is not doubted (such as in this story); one may think of a woman living alone or a bartender as equally likely possibilities.[16]

14. Danna Nolan Fewell, *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 70. See Elaine Adler Goodfriend, "Judg 11:1-2: Prostitute, Mother of Jephthah," in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 242: "Although the paternity of a prostitute's children may often be uncertain, the biblical author identifies Gilead as Jephthah's father." Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 169, also takes Gilead as an individual.

15. David Marcus, "The Bargaining between Jephthah and the Elders (Judges 11:4-11)," *JANES* 19 (1989): 95–100.

16. A further difficulty lies in that the meaning of the root includes any female sexual misconduct, only one of which would be to sell sex. Some scholars doubt that a woman would be able to support herself if unattached to a patriarchal household, except by prostitution; see Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), esp. "'To Play the Harlot': An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor," 219–36, and "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," 197–218; "Prostitution in the Social World and the Religious Rhetoric of Ancient Israel," in *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone

Several instances in the Hebrew Bible present the noun "woman" added to a participle, like in the expression here, "woman who prostitutes herself/commits sexual misconduct" or "female prostitute." This is unnecessary from the point of view of the language, and in my opinion it points to a woman in a situation of prostitution, wet-nursing, or whatever the meaning of the accompanying participle be, not to a woman regularly exercising a profession.[17] The only thing that "son of another woman" and Jephthah's expulsion indicate is that he had a lower social status than his brothers.

Jephthah fled from his brothers and dwelt in "the Land of Good/*Tob*." Focusing on male issues, the text does not say anything about the family situation of any of Gilead's sons (Jephthah or the other sons) or his wives (were they still alive?) as this quarrel happened. Did Jephthah flee alone or was he married already? Was his daughter already born or was she born in Tob? We do not know since the narrator tells of her only at the moment she comes out of the door to greet her father.

At this new location, a band of bereft people gather around Jephthah.[18] Worth noticing is that Jephthah once again is not the subject of the verbs: he is expelled; he is joined by disenfranchised people (ריקים, v. 3). The term ריקים, "empty, vain," is a term that appears elsewhere only in Proverbs 12:11 and Judges 9:4. Proverbs 12:11 helps confirm that ריקים is not a neutral or positive term: whoever pursues vain (things or persons, unstated) is devoid of sense. In Judges 9:4, Abimelech's association with "worthless and reckless fellows" (NRSV) also is caused, at least partially, by a similarly precarious family situation. In Judges 11:3, such an association seems to serve to ensure Jephthah a living and fighting skills, both of which will lead him to become a commander, a chief, and a judge.

This flashback by the narrator helps explain why Jephthah was no longer living among his kindred and why he negotiated with so much mistrust before accepting the elders' offer to go as their head to fight the Ammonites. Jephthah is a man who does not forget how he was treated by his brothers—and who could blame him for that?

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and Laura K. McClure (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 40–58; Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 176–78.

17. See my *Women at Work in the Deuteronomistic History* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 23–30, 321–28.

18. NRSV renders ריקים as "outlaws," but with Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, at 180, I prefer to think of these individuals (only men? I doubt it) as people who became robbed of their land and means of sustenance, who had to take recourse to unconventional means of survival. Of course, seen from the established landowners, these must have been not only unsavory but also dangerous fellows.

*Negotiations with the Elders (11:4-11)*

The discussion with the elders of Gilead is one of the few negotiations with a positive outcome. It is initiated by the elders, who come with a demand that is rejected by Jephthah: We will go to fight with you, under your command (v. 6). From experience Jephthah knows that once that goal is achieved, he will be discarded. He thus asks for more, for recognition beyond the war, and this recognition means more than being their governor (ראש); it means restitution to his position of son in his father's house, of which he had been robbed.[19] The elders agree but subtly withdraw their own participation in the battle, leaving Jephthah alone in the whole business of preparing for war against Ammon. Disguised as a great honor (that of fighting YHWH's battle) there are mixed messages from the Gileadites. Ironically, this mirrors the patriarchal attitude toward the prostitute as well: we need you but you are not going to be one of us. And Jephthah knew, of course, since that was their attitude toward his mother and himself that he had sucked in from his childhood. And how difficult it is to resist that which we have sucked!

The term דבר (both "word" and "matter, fact") appears repeatedly in these verses. In her analysis of this narrative, J. Cheryl Exum notes the power of words to kill (his daughter and thousands of Ephraimites at Mizpah), to teach obedience (by the narrator having the daughter and Jephthah comply with the vow), and also to heal through the women's remembrance of the daughter in their yearly festival.[20] Words and deeds had affected Jephthah, not only his daughter (especially those words that are rarely spoken in the open, such as "he's a son of a . . ."); these allowed his brothers and the town's elders to rob him of any right and support and expel him. Not all of Jephthah's words produce the same effect, however. There are two different settings in which Jephthah's life occurs, that of his family and that of the military. In the public setting he is assertive and—according to war standards—successful: "In the second and fourth segments [the battles against the Ammonites and the Ephraimites] he emerges as active and resilient, a subject who takes charge of the situation and changes historical events. . . . Considered diachronically, the four segments constitute an antiphonal movement,

19. As argued by Marcus, "The Bargaining," 99, on the basis of semantic parallels between the causative of שוב plus direct object and Akkadian *turru ana* in adoption documents.

20. J. Cheryl Exum, "On Judges 11," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 136.

*Judges 11:4-11*

4After a time the Ammonites made
war against Israel. 5And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the
elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah
from the land of Tob. 6They said to
Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, so that we may fight with the
Ammonites." 7But Jephthah said to the
elders of Gilead, "Are you not the very
ones who rejected me and drove me
out of my father's house? So why do
you come to me now when you are in
trouble?" 8The elders of Gilead said to
Jephthah, "Nevertheless, we have now
turned back to you, so that you may go
with us and fight with the Ammonites,
and become head over us, over all
the inhabitants of Gilead." 9Jephthah
said to the elders of Gilead, "If you
bring me home again to fight with the
Ammonites, and the Lord gives them
over to me, I will be your head." 10And
the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah,
"The Lord will be witness between
us; we will surely do as you say." 11So
Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head
and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the
Lord at Mizpah.

with the women signaling the descending motion and the all-male, military, public environment signaling Jephthah's ascent."[21] In his family's setting he is far from successful with words.

The conclusion of this scene involves an oath by the elders to accept Jephthah's conditions, with YHWH as witness of their intent to observe what they have promised (11:10), and a final assembly at Mizpah, in which he is made commander and governor.

### *Confrontations with the Ammonites (11:12-33)*

This confrontation with the Ammonites is set in three scenes. There is a first confrontation before any actual battle, which is a dialogue between both parties (vv. 12-27); then the narrator reports on several movements by Jephthah in the larger area of Manasseh, for battle preparations (including apparently recruitment of soldiers [vv. 28-31]); and there is finally the battle report (vv. 32-33).

21. Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman*, JSOTSup 310 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 194. Fuchs speaks of a private and a public man, which are trickier categories in the biblical world than in ours (economic and inheritance matters, to take one example, run through the family but were not private, in my understanding).

*Judges 11:12-33*

[12]Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What is there between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" [13]The king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel, on coming from Egypt, took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." [14]Once again Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites [15]and said to him: "Thus says Jephthah: Israel did not take away the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites, [16]but when they came up from Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh. [17]Israel then sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, 'Let us pass through your land'; but the king of Edom would not listen. They also sent to the king of Moab, but he would not consent. So Israel remained at Kadesh. [18]Then they journeyed through the wilderness, went around the land of Edom and the land of Moab, arrived on the east side of the land of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the

### First Scene: Preparation for War (11:12-27)

The verbal confrontation between both leaders through messengers leads to further preparations for war. At first sight this pericope would seem to offer little insight into particularly feminist concerns; however, report of preparations for war is instrumental to understand the social and political world in which Jephthah, his family, and his community live. The scene involves a series of speeches by Jephthah and the Ammonite king through their respective messengers.[22] Most scholars see this scene as an attempt by Jephthah to solve the issue peacefully. His whole exchange with the elders, however, presupposes war (the verb לחם appears thirteen times between 10:9 and 11:32); perhaps it was unrealistic to think of a peaceful negotiation when the Ammonites had been oppressing them for eighteen years (10:8). Furthermore, one may wonder why Jephthah would want peace, when his skills are not in dialogue but in war. Patriarchy feels much more at ease in war than in dialogue with the "other," as war gives patriarchal men occasion to show their much cherished qualities of physical strength, endurance, cruelty, and

22. See Assis, *Self-Interest*, who sees a fourfold argument, including a historical, a theological, a threat-intimidation, and an ethical argument (chart on 202–3 and further development on 204–8).

*Judges 11:12-33 (cont.)*

Arnon was the boundary of Moab.
19 Israel then sent messengers to King
Sihon of the Amorites, king of Hesh-
bon; and Israel said to him, 'Let us
pass through your land to our country.'
20 But Sihon did not trust Israel to pass
through his territory; so Sihon gathered
all his people together, and encamped
at Jahaz, and fought with Israel. 21 Then
the Lord, the God of Israel, gave Sihon
and all his people into the hand of Is-
rael, and they defeated them; so Israel
occupied all the land of the Amorites,
who inhabited that country. 22 They oc-
cupied all the territory of the Amorites
from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from
the wilderness to the Jordan. 23 So now
the Lord, the God of Israel, has con-
quered the Amorites for the benefit of
his people Israel. Do you intend to take
their place? 24 Should you not possess
what your god Chemosh gives you to
possess? And should we not be the
ones to possess everything that the
Lord our God has conquered for our
benefit? 25 Now are you any better than
King Balak son of Zippor of Moab? Did
he ever enter into conflict with Israel,
or did he ever go to war with them?
26 While Israel lived in Heshbon and its
villages, and in Aroer and its villages,
and in all the towns that are along the

bravery.[23] It is important to notice Jephthah's propensity to regard any interlocutor as an enemy, even his own daughter (11:35, notice the use of the root כרע) or the Ephraimites (12:1-6). It is, therefore, improbable that he would have been seeking a peaceful arrangement. Since the Gileadite elders had withdrawn from the whole issue when they agreed to restore Jephthah as their leader, he needs to raise his own army, and I understand his verbal battle with the Ammonites to be part of such an endeavor. Jephthah is not negotiating peace with Ammon but seeking to raise the Israelites' zeal for YHWH's war against Ammon.[24]

### Second Scene: Final Preparations under YHWH's Spirit (11:29-31)

Beginning the second scene, immediately after the oral confrontation, we are told that "YHWH's Spirit happened [came] upon Jephthah" (v.

23. Rape is also a weapon of war, as recognized even by Sisera's mother (5:30), by the abduction of girls after the war against Benjamin (Judg 20–21), and perhaps by Ehud against Eglon and Jael against Sisera (3:21-22; 4:21).

24. Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah's Daughter," *Prooftexts* 17 (1997): 280, notes that "the Bible does not approbate compromise with idolaters and endorse ceding God-granted land to pagans." On another level, the speech belongs to the narrator, not to Jephthah, making one wonder at its intention.

Arnon, three hundred years, why did you not recover them within that time? [27]It is not I who have sinned against you, but you are the one who does me wrong by making war on me. Let the LORD, who is judge, decide today for the Israelites or for the Ammonites." [28]But the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message that Jephthah sent him.

[29]Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. [30]And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, [31]then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering." [32]So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand. [33]He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.

29); thus what we have is its effects on him, on his family, and on Israel (vv. 29-33). Within this section we need to look particularly at Jephthah's negotiations with YHWH. The immediate result (the *wayyiqtol* chain indicates continuity of actions) is that "he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites" (v. 29). Interestingly, Jephthah's vow is not mentioned as the immediate action of the Spirit. Neither is there a notice that the Spirit left him (unlike Samson when his hair was cut) at any time. Since Israel is still eagerly awaiting an answer from YHWH to their repentance in Judges 10, one may infer that—like other saviors in Judges—YHWH's Spirit comes upon him in order to enable Jephthah to win the war against Israel's oppressors. The question of human agency vis-à-vis divine guidance is too complex to be answered unambiguously. Two further subsections can be distinguished in this scene.

### *Negotiations with YHWH*

The most important issue for the outcome of the story is that of the vow uttered by Jephthah after his preparation for war and before the actual battle(s). This issue stems from Jephthah's relationship to the God of Israel, his God. As he deals with the Ammonites, he seems to be a "peace-seeking politician, but also . . . a devout follower of Yhwh, as he

repeatedly invokes His name (Judg. 11.9, 21, 23, 24, 27; 12.3)."[25] We may add to Esther Fuchs's list also Jephthah's words to his daughter (11:31, 35) and the narrator's mention that "Jephthah spoke all his words before the Lord at Mizpah" (11:11). The text presents him, then, as a religious man. Jephthah's lineage is obscure, but somewhere, sometime, he had learned about Israel's wilderness traditions and about YHWH's promise that the land Gilead occupied was theirs to inherit. From his negotiations with his daughter we also learn that he would not take such a vow lightly, even though he must have been devastated by it. Devastated or not, YHWH had not asked for such a vow; poignantly, Robert O'Connell states that "there is an analogy between the deliverer and those delivered as to their foibles. In the Jephthah account, the chief foible highlighted by the rhetoric is that of Israel's utilitarian view of covenant devotion to YHWH."[26]

### *Jephthah's Vow Concerning His Only Daughter*

We come now to what is probably the thorniest issue in the whole book of Judges, for, unlike other stories of terror, there are here so many ambiguities that it is impossible to agree on the text's meaning (unlike, for instance, the *pîlegeš*-wife's death in chapter 19). Even accepting that personal opinion and ethical or religious qualms might lead scholars to prefer one or another explanation of the vow, the fact remains that this text is filled with grammatical problems and open-ended translation possibilities. Thus, it would be presumptuous of me to claim to have solved any of them, and rehearsing every argument offered for or against the daughter's murder as a whole-burnt offering is also out of the question. In the next paragraphs I will shortly examine the main points of contention.

*What Do the Uttered Words Mean (11:31-33)?* The NRSV translates verse 31: "Then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering." The Hebrew reads "the comer-out who comes out of my house's doors to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites," followed by the conjunction and the vow, "I shall offer

25. Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 193.

26. Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 186.

him/it as a burnt offering." The main cause of disagreement concerns whether the conjunction ו indicates two different actions or only one. And related to this there is another question: can the term עולה be translated in any other way than "burnt offering"?[27]

Was Jephthah thinking of a person or an animal? Most scholars answer: a human being—anyone but his daughter.[28] Others point out that Jephthah was conversant enough with Israel's laws and customs to make it "reasonable to assume that Jephthah made his vow fully aware of the Israelite custom of maidens coming out to greet a victor after battle."[29] Those who think he was conversant with Israelite law tend also to think that he would not have sacrificed his daughter, since that was unacceptable at least after Abraham's aborted offering of Isaac. Starting from that presupposition, Tamarkin Reis looks for another explanation, for "Hebrews may not take human life except in cases of self-defense, God-sanctioned warfare, and capital punishment. Hebrew men have no sovereignty over the lives of their wives, children, and slaves."[30] According to her, what Jephthah offered was not to kill but to dedicate to YHWH the first male slave to come out, redeemed according to the laws of Leviticus 27.

Renate Jost notes the use of the root יצא to indicate aggressive behavior by males in Judges, mostly in war (e.g., 3:10, 19-24; 9:42-43; 20:14-31),

27. Bernard P. Robinson, "The Story of Jephthah and his Daughter: Then and Now," *Bib* 85 (2004): 334–38, reviews several possibilities and concludes that understanding והעליתהו עולה as a burnt offering, even if the preposition ל is missing, is the alternative that presents fewer difficulties.

28. Robinson, ibid., 338, argues that היוצא never refers to animals; Lauren A. S. Monroe ("Disembodied Women: Sacrificial Language and the Deaths of Bat-Jephthah, Cozbi, and the Bethlehemite Concubine," *CBQ* 75 [2013]: 36) states that לקראת is never used in the Bible "to describe an animal in motion."

29. David Marcus, *Jephthah and His Vow* (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1986), 15, unavailable to me (quoted by Kamrada "'Stranger to One Another,'" 28). According to Shulamit Valler, "The Story of Jephthah's Daughter in the Midrash," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4, 2nd ser. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 48–58, the Sages blamed Jephthah for his flawed understanding of: (a) faith (uttering the vow), (b) Torah (understanding his vow literally), and (c) reality (seeking honor over against life).

30. Tamarkin Reis, "Spoiled Child," 281. We cannot rehearse all her arguments here; suffice it to say that she presupposes that the redemption laws of Lev 27 were applicable and that Num 20–21 offer the background information to understanding that Jephthah is motivating the Gileadites to material gain from the war (not being a case of חרם), after his earlier speech produced little result.

while the same word signals danger for women. Besides Jephthah's daughter, the *pîlegeš*-wife in Judges 19 leaves her husband/master (here another verb is used) and is brought out (יצא, causative) to the mob (19:25), and the girls dancing at Shiloh whom the remaining Benjaminites will abduct to force them to be their wives are also said to come out, יצא (21:21-24).[31] More reflection is needed on the relationship of space, family, and femicide. Myth has it that the household and the family are safe realms for women, and while these stories seem to confirm such a myth (their misfortune occurs once they come out), a more careful scrutiny shows that their rape and/or death comes from a decision made by males responsible for them.[32] Mercedes Navarro Puerto also notes the contrast with the foundational narratives, where Miriam and the other women came out with timbrels with no danger.[33] But not so in Judges, where even Jael (also said to come out to meet Sisera, 4:18), a single woman facing a big (even if debilitated) warrior in an enclosed realm, would not automatically have been safe.

*Why Did No One Stop Him?* If one accepts that the whole-burnt sacrifice took place, one has to explain why nobody stopped it. Here feminists stress the difference between YHWH's protection of Isaac in Genesis 22 (and the people's protection of Jonathan in 1 Samuel 14) and YHWH's complicity with Jephthah's vow on this occasion.[34] Whether the Deuteronomist thought that Jephthah should have kept or broken his vow is difficult to assert, since vows (especially rash vows) should be avoided in the first place. On the other hand, later tradition makes Jephthah's daughter a prefiguration of Jesus Christ and thus extols both Jephthah and the daughter. Regarding women's well-being, the problem with this

31. Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 180–81. Outside Judges, the same verbal form, participle feminine, of יצא is used twice of Rebecca (Gen 24:15, 45).

32. Even though the decision to kidnap the girls dancing at the Shiloh festival is not made by their fathers or husbands (as in Judg 11 and 19), their immediate male relatives do not take action to protect them.

33. Mercedes Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio: In-conclusiones en el libro de los Jueces* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2013), 57.

34. There are several other texts regarding YHWH's right to the firstborn, as well as extrabiblical use of this motif. As Robinson, "The Story of Jephthah and His Daughter," 334, wonders: "What was the appeal of the rash-vow motif that led to its frequent occurrence over national and cultural boundaries?" Recently, Ken Stone, "Animal Difference, Sexual Difference, and the Daughter of Jephthah," *BibInt* 24 (2016): 1–16, reflects on the interrelationship of animal difference and sexual difference in several texts, particularly in those involving a sacrifice to God.

approach is that it focuses on the daughter's (and since she is nameless, any daughter's) self-sacrificing for her father, regardless of her own interests and life perspectives.[35]

Danna Nolan Fewell advances another possibility: that the daughter herself "knew that someone would die that day because of his reckless and desperate vow. Perhaps she also knew that no one else's death would make him [her father] stop and realize that his disregard for innocent life made him no better than the Gileadites who had treated him like garbage to be discarded."[36] Perhaps our greatest difficulty lies in accepting that child sacrifice was practiced on extreme occasions and—judging from the material witness offered by archaeology and by several biblical texts—it was acceptable and perhaps even praiseworthy.[37] I would not go so far as to doubt parents' grief at any such action; yet, not all parents loved or love their children, and society at best turns a blind eye on their sacrifice—even today. We may suppose, then, that there were mixed reactions by the people about Jephthah's willingness to sacrifice even his most beloved relative.

> Again and again, her [Jephthah's daughter's] story is invoked to suit the ideologies of the time: she is one age's martyr, another's tragic heroine, today's battered woman. Yet she is most often a mirror, reflecting the interpreter's values and self—for what we see in Jephthah's daughter says much about who we are, what we believe about ourselves, what we believe about others, what we believe about society, and what we believe about God.[38]

*Why Did She Not Escape?* Many commentaries blame the daughter for not having resisted her father's vow, echoing Jephthah, who blames her

35. Such an approach forgets that Jesus' sacrifice need not be repeated; "Western civilization has been shaped by the understanding that suffering, sacrifice, and self-sacrifice, which are at the heart of Christian theology, are redemptive," states Beryl Ann Ingram ("A Feminist Rereading of the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter [Judges 11:29-40] in Sacred Text and Representations," [PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2002], 9). Furthermore, understanding this sacrifice as positive is also gendered (see Milne's study, referred to in n. 41 below). On Jephthah's daughter's sacrifice as prefiguration of Christ in literature and music see Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, chaps. 3 and 4.

36. Fewell, *The Children*, 79.

37. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 111.

38. Valerie C. Cooper, "Someplace to Cry: Jephthah's Daughter and the Double Dilemma of Black Women in America," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex and Violence in the Bible*, ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004), 191.

for being the one to be offered. Had she resisted in a more active way, what kind of a life would have been possible for a runaway child? Since it was clear from Jephthah's words that *he* was not taking back his vow and (as just mentioned) nobody around them interceded for her, what could she do, with no support from her father and no mother, aunt, uncle, or older brother to step in? "A denigrated woman or a violated child is not an aberration in an otherwise healthy social ecosystem, as the patriarchs would have us believe, but is instead another victim of systemic violence that results from the oppression of patriarchy."[39] This type of violence against the daughter, the violence against the *pîlegeš*-wife later in Judges, and several other forms of violence are not isolated events, nor are they only the product of a sick mind. There is social complicity, manifested in deafness and blindness toward violence, in poor knowledge of people's rights, in tacit permission to exercise violence, and in isolating victims from any support group (family, friends, other victims).

*What Is YHWH's Responsibility in This Vow?* The main reason for discussing this topic stems from our reluctance to have God participate in this killing (that is, supposing the literal offering of the daughter). Commentaries range from those who blame God only by default for not stopping Jephthah to those who notice that Jephthah was acting under YHWH's Spirit and thus YHWH cannot be exonerated. At any rate, this is a silent deity, who speaks neither for nor against the vow, but who does not stop it by having Jephthah lose against the Ammonites (the vow was conditioned to the Ammonites' defeat). At any rate, "humanity is as much revealed by God's silences as by God's words. God's silence in Judges 11 uncovers and reveals the cold machinations of a heartless humanity; Israel shows little compassion for Jephthah and less for his daughter. Moreover, the Israelites knew better and should have done better."[40] A telling study by Pamela Milne of a group of university students reports that,

> The M[ale] readers . . . exhibited a strong tendency to see Jephthah negatively or to ignore him. On the other hand, four of six female readers, two R[eligious] and two N[on]R[eligious], classified Jephthah as a good character. The female readers were less inclined to be critical of Jephthah. Their responses to this question reinforced the results from the identity question. More female readers than male chose to

39. Ingram, "Feminist Rereading," 4.
40. Cooper, "Someplace to Cry," 189.

> be Jephthah and that seems to have been because more female readers saw Jephthah as a good character.[41]

This evidence takes us further than the issue at stake here, but it is of utmost importance that we ask about a text's effect on women vis-à-vis men and that we realize that there is an alternative model to the kind of male Jephthah represents. Men who utter thoughtless vows, putting their family in danger; men who see even their beloved ones as enemies when they do not comply with their demented projects; men whose pride does not allow them to cancel a wrong word should not be a model, neither to the Dtr nor to us.

Perhaps because Jephthah's vow has always seemed so harmful and useless since YHWH's Spirit should have been enough for him, all types of reasons are offered to try to explain his behavior. Most of them refer to his earlier years: "It seems that his basic motivation throughout the story is to find his way back into the Gileadite society, to strengthen his position as a leader of Gilead, ceasing to be a foreigner, an outsider,"[42] but lack of faith and manipulation of YHWH may also be attributed to him.

### Last Scene: The Battle Outcome (11:32-33)

The final scene concerns the battle outcome, which is YHWH's defeat of Ammon. In a sense, the following scene, Jephthah's return home and the negotiation with his daughter, is also an outcome of his victory over Ammon. Since they are also united to the memorial instituted in the daughter's honor, however, we will treat them separately.

#### *Negotiations with His Daughter (11:34-38)*

There is general agreement on the meaning of this scene; nonetheless, there are some textual difficulties and ambiguities, as in verse 39, where the vow is alluded to but not repeated, so the ambiguity as to what did Jephthah actually vow remains.

In verse 34, Jephthah's daughter is introduced: "Behold [והנה]! His daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing!" Does

41. Pamela J. Milne, "Son of a Prostitute and Daughter of a Warrior: What Do You Think the Story in Judges 11 Means," *Lectio Difficilior* 2 (2009), under "Q. 10 Which characters would you identify as good?," http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/09_2/milne_son_of_a_prostitute.html.

42. Kamrada, "'Stranger to One Another,'" 21; see her n. 34, referring to Houtman and Spronk's theory of the Ammonite war as compensation "for his ambiguous origin (being a '*Hurenkind*')."

*Judges 11:34-38*

34Then Jephthah came to his home
at Mizpah; and there was his daugh-
ter coming out to meet him with tim-
brels and with dancing. She was his
only child; he had no son or daughter
except her. 35When he saw her, he
tore his clothes, and said, "Alas, my
daughter! You have brought me very
low; you have become the cause of
my great trouble to me. For I have
opened my mouth to the Lord, and I
cannot take back my vow." 36She said
to him, "My father, if you have opened
your mouth to the Lord, do to me ac-
cording to what has gone out of your
mouth, now that the Lord has given
you vengeance against your enemies,
the Ammonites." 37And she said to her
father, "Let this thing be done for me:
Grant me two months, so that I may go
and wander on the mountains, and be-
wail my virginity, my companions and
I." 38"Go," he said and sent her away
for two months. So she departed, she
and her companions, and bewailed her
virginity on the mountains.

והנה reflect the narrator's surprise for the reader's sake or is it Jephthah's surprise? "And only she, alone," ורק היא יחידה, which may mean that she was the only child (thus most interpreters, although that is what the next sentence states) or that she came out alone.[43] The association of women and music, particularly with tambourines, is well attested, both in text and arts. Thus, it would not have been far-fetched for Jephthah to imagine the whole village (the whole region?) coming out shouting after his—more properly, YHWH's—defeat of a powerful enemy. He was hoping for recognition from Gilead but only his own daughter comes out.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky wonders whether the daughter's coming out with timbrels and dancing (which was a woman's ritual at soldiers' victorious homecoming) was not her trying to do the mother's job;[44] this would explain why the father was so upset at his daughter's sight, while on the other hand casting a(nother) shadow on Jephthah's characterization. Dolores Kamrada, however, relates both rituals as rites of passage:

> Following the logic of the rite of passage theory, the coming out of Jephthah's daughter in the biblical presentation may be summarized like this: being a *bᵉṯûlāh* she is in a transitional, dangerous position be-

43. Assis, *Self-Interest*, 214–15; Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 181 n. 10. There is an additional textual difficulty in the phrase "he had no son or daughter besides him [אין־לו ממנו בן או־בת]," (masculine pronoun, rather than "her"). Perhaps the masculine is intended to be inclusive; perhaps it refers proleptically to the end of Jephthah's dynasty (there will soon be none besides him).

44. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 108.

> tween two life-stages (of the daughter and the wife). She has just become a nubile woman. She runs an extremely great risk by coming out of her father's house. Nevertheless, it is possibly a usual ritual performed by (nubile) women to go out to greet them ritually as warriors. To undertake her new position, her new status as a nubile woman, it may be even essential to go out to greet them ritually as women generally do even if she might be aware of the vow of her father. If she were to stay in the house, it would possibly seem as if she "were resigned to," did not take on, her new status—her later request for the female retreat may also indicate that she really endeavours to be "initiated" into her new position. Yet, by coming out, she faces and even confronts her father.[45]

Be that as it may, all the daughter could do was to ask for a respite, especially after it was evident to her that her father would not take responsibility for his own folly, that adults around them would only watch, and that nobody thought the vow should not be carried out. Also, the narrator makes her a dutiful daughter who puts first of all her father's piety and her obedience to the father rather than her own life.[46] On the other hand, a vow to YHWH is no small thing, especially for somebody whose name is "He-opened," and the daughter only confirms this. Thus the daughter asks for a retreat on the mountains, accompanied by her peers (and their mothers, I would assume; there was already enough turmoil without letting teenage girls roam alone for two months).[47] The daughter's words start with "father" and conclude with "my companions" (רעותי, v. 37), which may be interpreted as a veiled criticism of him who put her in that situation and also as a clear manifestation of where she is to find comfort. The father's last word to his daughter is a command: "Go!"[48]

45. Kamrada, "'Stranger to One Another,'" 30–31.

46. See Susanne Scholz, "Judges," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 120.

47. Tamarkin Reis, "Spoiled Child," 286–87, reading carefully the Hebrew text notes that the expression שני חדשים, "two months" (vv. 38, 40), does not have a preposition "for." She further notes the logistics and danger that a two-month reprieve would have meant and proposes to read as "two times, a month apart," coinciding with a moon festival already established among Israelites (but not Yahwistic). It makes sense in terms of the time span, and it would not invalidate Jephthah's daughter's protagonism in turning this established ritual into one in her remembrance.

48. See Tamarkin Reis, "Spoiled Child," 286, who understands her going down the mountains (a textual inconsistency noted by many) as a permission to go down spiritually, not literally, to seek another god's favor, since neither YHWH nor Jephthah have been able or willing to undo her act of defiance to her father.

### *"Give Me That Strength of Jephthah's Daughter": Reading the Story of Jephthah's Daughter in Africa*

Throughout the ages, the Daughter of Jephthah narrative has both fascinated and appalled its readers. In particular, the reference to the annual commemoration that celebrates the young girl's life has captured the imagination of its readers. Mary Ann Beavis argues that, through this act of commemoration, the daughter of Jephthah emerges as a heroine—the "annual women's festival extoll[ing] the strength and nobility of the daughter."[49] In my South African context, a similar line of interpretation manifests itself but to very different effect. In a series of articles, Gerald West highlights the very interesting way in which the Daughter of Jephthah narrative has been interpreted by Isaiah Shembe, a prominent leader of the Church of the Nazarites.[50] In an early act of postcolonial interpretation that merges the interpretation of the biblical text with traditional African Zulu rituals, Shembe drew on "the Nguni belief in the power of young virgin girls to protect the wellbeing of communities" as well as the biblical account of the daughter of Jephthah in order to "demonstrate how the young women in the Nazarite community can fight in the battle against racial injustice."[51] West cites the work of Carol Muller, who in the 1990s has conducted ethnographic research into the religious ritual practices of the Nazarite community in South Africa:

> The prophet Isaiah Shembe used his knowledge of the mission Bible and the mythical power of virgin girls to win his battles against the racist state. Political struggle assumed form as spiritual and moral warfare, with the virgin girls as the frontline warriors. The cost of this protection of female adherents, however, was the denial of sexual desire. In this context, sacrifice was reinvented in terms of an innovative combination of

49. Mary Ann Beavis, "A Daughter in Israel: Celebrating Bat Jephthah (Judg. 11.39d-40)," *Feminist Theology* 13, no. 1 (2004): 17. See also Beth Gerstein, "A Look at Judges 11:40," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading of Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 175–93.

50. Gerald West, "The Bible and the Female Body in Ibandla lamaNazaretha: Isaiah Shembe and Jephthah's Daughter," *OTE* 20, no. 2 (2007): 489–509; "Layers of Reception of Jephthah's Daughter (Judges 11) among the AmaNazaretha: From the Early 1900s to Today," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. William John Lyons and Emma England (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 185–98.

51. West, "The Bible and the Female Body," 497.

> Old Testament and Nguni traditional practice, and located in the purity of young women's bodies.[52]

In one particular Nazarite ritual, a traditional Nguni puberty rite held for a girl on her first menstruation (called *umgonqo*, translated as "seclusion/confinement") is merged with the Daughter of Jephthah narrative. Taking the shape of a collective rite between July 25 and September 27 of each year, the virgin girls are called together in a commemoration of the daughter of Jephthah who is held up as a model of courage and obedience. For the Nazarite community to be victorious, the virgin girls are required to offer their bodies up in obedience to the will of the prophet/God.[53] One of the hymns that is sung during this liturgical reenactment starts as follows:

> O shall go alone
> Into the valley of sorrow
> *Chorus:* Give me that strength
> Of Japhet's daughter

Sung by the entire community, the purpose of this ritual is to encourage the virgin girls to keep their virginity until they are married, calling on the whole community to show the same strength of character as exhibited by Jephthah's daughter. In this way, Muller notes: "'The daughters of Isaiah,' like 'the daughter of Jephthah,' have an integral role to play in both the warfare and the victory over the enemy."[54]

It is indeed remarkable to see the strong interpretative tradition regarding the daughter of Jephthah narrative that has taken such a unique shape in the indigenous context of the Nazarite community in South Africa, offering a good example of the inculturation of the biblical narrative. As feminist postcolonial interpreters such as Musa Dube and Kwok Pui-lan have pointed out, however, it is important to also subject postcolonial interpretation to a gender analysis.[55]

So Isaiah Shembe's position toward women is complex. On the one hand, Shembe provided, as Muller points out, a "spiritual and economic refuge for many women and orphans that were

52. Carol Ann Muller, *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire: Nazarite Women's Performance in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), xix, cited in West, "The Bible and the Female Body," 497.

53. West, "The Bible and the Female Body," 497.

54. Muller, *Rituals of Fertility*, 180, cited in West, "Layers of Reception of Jephthah's Daughter," 193.

55. Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000); Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

previously in polygamous marriages that were dissolved in light of the missionaries' critique of the institution when their husbands converted to Christianity."[56] On the other hand, the emphasis on the daughter's sacrifice that is held up as an example for other young women to sacrifice themselves for the community is problematic.[57]

Such an interpretation poses a great danger to young women in particular in a (South) African context in which patriarchy is still very much intact. West rightly points out that the HIV and AIDS pandemic is one of the great challenges confronting the members of the Church of the Nazarites and, I would add, in particular to the young women in this community.[58] In South Africa this dreaded disease is truly a gendered pandemic with 62 percent of the 5.3 million people ages fifteen and older who are infected being female; one in four women between the ages of twenty and twenty-four, compared to one in fourteen men in the same age group, is infected.[59] Denise Ackermann, a South African theologian, writes that in many countries in Africa, the "condition that carries the highest risk of HIV infection is that of being a married woman."[60] The reason for this is that women have little agency in marital relations to say no to unprotected sex if they suspect their husbands of infidelity.[61] Moreover, probably just as foolish as sacrificing a young woman as a result of her father's impulsive vow proved to be, in South Africa today one finds the great folly of

56. Muller, *Rituals of Fertility*, xix, cited in "The Bible and the Female Body," 496.

57. As Exum, "On Judges 11," 139, rightly warns with regard to such an interpretation of the daughter of Jephthah narrative: "Patriarchal ideology here coopts a women's ceremony in order to glorify the victim. The androcentric message of the story . . . is . . . submit to paternal authority. You may have to sacrifice your autonomy; you may lose your life, and even your name, but your sacrifice will be remembered, indeed celebrated for generations to come."

58. West, "Layers of Reception of Jephthah's Daughter," 198.

59. http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/southafrica/. Beverley Haddad, "Surviving the HIV and AIDS Epidemic in South Africa: Women Living and Dying, Theologising and Being Theologised," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 131 (2008): 49.

60. Denise M. Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry: Rereading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic," in *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, ed. Musa Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 36.

61. Ibid. See also Haddad, "Surviving the HIV and AIDS Epidemic in South Africa," 49, who has identified "women's biological susceptibility to the virus, their subordinate position in sexual relationships prescribed by culture, and the high incidence of gender violence" as contributing factors explaining the link between gender and HIV-AIDS; Beverley Haddad, "Gender, Violence and HIV and AIDS: A Deadly Silence in the Church," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2001): 93–106.

a widespread myth that having sex with a virgin daughter may cure one from HIV and AIDS.[62]

I argue that within the vivid portrayal of how the patriarchal system leads to the dehumanization and the death of a young girl in the Daughter of Jephthah narrative, one finds flickerings of female resistance that point to the power women have in spite of domination. By noticing these traces of female resistance in the text, individuals may be more inclined to contemplate the significance of continuing resistance in their own context. For instance, the twin notions of power as resistance in spite of oppression and power as solidarity that were identified in terms of the Daughter of Jephthah narrative are illustrated well by means of two examples of (female) resistance from the African continent.[63]

First, an interesting example of female resistance in spite of domination is narrated by Fulata Moyo, who tells of women in her country of Malawi employing menstruation taboos in order to resist the unjust patriarchal structures that have been closely connected to making young women most susceptible to HIV and AIDS.[64] In Southern Malawi, Mang'anja, Yao, and Lomwe women have the custom of hanging out a string of red beads in their bedrooms as an indication that they are menstruating and hence sexually unavailable. Some women, who suspect that their partners may carry the dreaded disease, will not replace the red beads with white beads that indicate their availability, so taking control of their sexual agency and protecting themselves from unprotected sexual intercourse.[65] Moyo describes these acts of employing traditional African customs for the sake of resisting injustice in terms of James Scott's

62. Isabel Apawo Phiri, "'Why Does God Allow Our Husbands to Hurt Us?' Overcoming Violence Against Women," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2002): 25, notes how babies as young as five months have been raped due to this mistaken belief that the mystery surrounding virgins absorbs and purifies the victim.

63. L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Female Resistance in Spite of Injustice: Human Dignity and the Daughter of Jephthah," *OTE* 26, no. 3 (2013): 607–22.

64. Miranda Pillay, "Women in the Church: Toward Developing Community in the Context of HIV and AIDS," in *Compassionate Circles: African Women Theologians Facing HIV*, ed. Ezra Chitando and Nontando Hadebe (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2009), 103, notes that even though HIV and AIDS affect all of humanity, "the pandemic is fuelled by the cultural, sexual and economic subordination of women."

65. Fulata Lusungu Moyo, "The Making of Vulnerable, Gyrating and Dangerous Menstruating Women through Chinamwali Socialization," in Chitando and Hadebe, *Compassionate Circles*, 40; "The Red Beads and White Beads: Malawian Women's Sexual Empowerment in the HIV and AIDS Era," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 11, no. 1 (2005): 53–66.

notion of "hidden transcripts" that captures the subtle forms of power that exist in many communities facing oppression. She argues as follows: "The string of red beads therefore becomes a 'hidden transcript' with which they 'voice' protest against the lack of mutuality in their sexual experiences. It also liberates and empowers them to influence the when and how of sex."[66]

A second example of power as resistance in spite of domination as well as power as solidarity regards the work of Ackermann, who has written extensively about the importance of lament in resisting injustice. In a series of essays during the 1990s around the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ackermann called on the broader South African community to join her in lament to resist the injustice of apartheid. For instance, in her essay, "Lamenting Tragedy from 'The Other Side,'" Ackermann writes:

> How and where are we to lament? Given the limited mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the understandable constraints imposed by the very nature of its mammoth task, the ethical clamour for justice will not go away. Neither will the need to speak the anger, pain, fear, remorse and guilt. There is much to lament—the loss of dear ones, the destruction of young lives, the loss of justice, the loss of our humanity, vision and faith.[67]

A similar argument can be made with regard to lament as resisting the injustice pertaining to HIV and AIDS. In her essay, "Tamar's Cry: Rereading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic," Ackermann writes how the church is called to lament the tragedy of HIV and AIDS. In particular, lament challenges patriarchy's power, which has been held responsible for making women particularly

66. Moyo, "The Making," 48.

67. Denise Ackermann, "Lamenting Tragedy from 'The Other Side,'" in *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society*, ed. James. R. Cochrane and Bastienne Klein (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2000), 232. See also Ackermann's essay, "'Take Up a Taunt Song': Women, Lament and Healing in South Africa," in *Reconstruction: The WCC Assembly Harare 1998 and the Churches in Southern Africa*, ed. L. Lagerwerf (Meinema: Zoetermeer, 1998), 135, in which she considers how Christian women in the South African context can raise their voices in support of justice and reconciliation: "Where can we sing our 'taunt song'? What kind of a song will it be? How can our singing effect healing in our communities?"

prone to this terrible disease. Ackermann argues:

> Saying it as it is, is the place to begin. What would it take for the churches to accept responsibility publically for our role in the promotion and maintenance of gender inequality . . . and when will we make the link between this woeful tradition and the present deadly impact of HIV and AIDS on the lives of women and men?[68]

Ackermann writes further about the importance of having solidarity with the victims of HIV and AIDS, accepting that there are no clear dividing lines between us and them, but rather we as the church are also infected. As she poignantly expresses: "The Body of Christ has AIDS."[69] In this regard, Ackermann speaks about the importance of lament in restoring the dignity of the individual, in hearing the stories of the victims. Just as the companions of the daughter of Jephthah surrounded her with their laments, hearing her story and sharing their own, the act of hearing and telling stories is responsible for creating an environment of "openness, vulnerability and mutual engagement that challenges stigmas, ostracization and loneliness of suffering and hopefully leads to acts of engagement, affirmation and care."[70]

In a context that is still deeply enmeshed in patriarchal ideology, one should understand that even such very limited acts of agency on the part of those trapped in systems of domination, which in the case of HIV and AIDS may be a death sentence, are of great significance. To raise one's voice in lament, to share one's story, to use red and white beads to regain one's sexual agency may sound insignificant, yet such acts serve as a source of inspiration and a reminder that another reality that believes in the dignity of both men and women as created in the image of God is possible. As Ackermann writes: "Resistance to the tragedy of suffering finds expression in the hope for healing and wholeness, and in the embracing of actions which express both an understanding of the tragic vision of life and that which counters tragedy."[71]

We cannot change the outcome of the tragic story of the Daughter of Jephthah. Yet

68. Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 40.
69. Ibid., 51.
70. Ibid., 42.
71. Ackermann, "Lamenting Tragedy from 'The Other Side'," 219.

by noticing instances of female resistance in spite of injustice in this narrative, we could imagine the possibility of resistance in contemporary situations of injustice that may inspire us in an act of solidarity, not only among women but among all who care about the plight of those finding themselves in situations of injustice, to keep on working for a world in which dehumanization and indignity are no more.

*L. Juliana M. Claassens*

There is much discussion on the meaning of the verb בכה + על־בתולים in verse 37: "I will/that I may cry over/at my בתולים." Many translations and commentaries assume that Jephthah's daughter laments her dying without children, but there are several other possibilities in life she was to miss. While the most popular translation is "because of my virginity," many question this rendering; it is best, with Peggy L. Day, to take it to mean the period between menarche and having a child and translate the preposition ל as "at," indicating the time in a woman's life for this ritual.

The Bible records far fewer rituals by women than by men, and those that it records are either dubbed "idolatry" or "prostitution after other gods" or left undescribed (e.g., the women coming out to greet warriors, the women crying for Tammuz). There is much to imagine here out of the precious little information given in the text. For instance, Day thinks of "an annual ceremony at which young women were socially recognized as having left childhood behind and entered *bĕtûlîm*, physical maturity."[72] The teenager was asking for a time to mourn her childhood, with all that entails, leaving it behind and becoming an adult.

> In ancient societies, the advent of puberty must have been terrifying to girls. . . . In wartime, that fate could be dire indeed. . . . Peacetime was not radically different; the fate of women in war is only an intensification of their normal destiny. Even in peacetime, every girl at puberty knew that she would be given away to a man of her *father's* choice, who might abuse and exploit her. Under the best circumstances, her husband would be good to her; still, half of all women would die in childbirth.[73]

72. Peggy L. Day, "From the Child Is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Gender and Difference*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 59; see also 69 n. 13, where she notes that there are some extra biblical hints (there is no direct biblical evidence on this) suggesting the termination of this period with the birth of a first child, but this is inconclusive.

73. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 113–14.

The scene ends with a sober tone: Jephthah's daughter returned (as promised) and her father did as promised.[74] "She had never slept with a man," adds the narrator. This information may seem out of place here, coming on the heels of the notice that her whole life (if offered as a burnt offering) or her future as wife and mother (if offered to be consecrated to YHWH) were terminated. Yet this notice reflects the strongest male preoccupation regarding female sexuality, that of genital exclusiveness. Feminist and queer scholars react to these presuppositions, noting, among other issues, that they do not reflect many women's sexual preoccupations or that they forget female pleasure. Navarro Puerto entertains the possibility of female erotic pleasure and sexual initiation at this ritual, even though these do not appear in the text or in patriarchal, heterosexual readings of sexuality, which ignore such.[75] Schneider focuses on the many women in Judges (at least from Gideon's *pîlegeš*-wife in chapter 8 to the Levite's *pîlegeš*-wife in Judges 19) whose sexual expressions are unrelated to marriage, thus looking at the possibility that what the daughter and her friends lament is the loss of any possibility of sexual (genital) activity, rather than maternity (as traditional commentaries assume was the issue).[76] On the other hand, "it is possible to understand the repeated emphasis on the daughter's virginity as a valorizing statement. Like beauty, virginity in women seems to be a mark of high distinction."[77] Physical virginity should not be discarded as an asset for women, since it gave the girl's family one extra element at the time of negotiating an advantageous marriage. Not only that: in some societies it still is a high expectation, and pathological jealousy of previous relationships (especially if there are children from those previous relationships) is often related to family violence, even in societies that have moved away from expecting girls to remain chaste until marriage. My point is not to condemn premarital relationships but rather to note that physical virginity in women is one of patriarchy's strong emphases, taught by and ensured as much as possible by both fathers and mothers, and it should not be so easily dismissed in assessing a biblical woman.

74. I keep here an intentional ambiguity, to match the text's ambiguity. There are at least three possibilities for interpreting v. 39: Jephthah's daughter's seclusion as a devoted person, her murder, or her redemption from performing any labor, including childbearing.

75. Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio*, 58–59.

76. Schneider, *Judges*, 181–82, focusing on sexual relations. See also Thomas Hanks's Contributing Voice on "sexual minorities" in Judges (pp. 12–15), by which he means men and women who do not conform to the heterosexual marriage pattern.

77. Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 191. See also Exum, "On Judges 11," 142.

In summary, there is a strong current of feminist studies that point to the possibilities and dangers this memorial of the daughter's sacrifice may bring about; they also point to the different perspectives in the text itself by the narrator, Jephthah, and his daughter.

### *Fulfillment of Jephthah's Vow Becomes His Daughter's Memorial (11:39-40)*

Although her life, at least her life as Jephthah's daughter, comes here to an end, "she became a custom" (if ותהי־חק is translated literally), that is, an annual memorial in her honor was established at Gilead. What kind of memorial this was will be now examined.

**TRANSLATION MATTERS**

There are two textual matters to be noted in verses 39-40. The first unusual thing is the feminine verb ותהי to speak of a custom in Israel: "she became a custom," with immediate referent, Jephthah's daughter, along with the ambiguity of the word חק, "statute" or "custom." The feminine verb might be a conscious reference to Jephthah's daughter or it may be, more generally, a reference to her story.

The second ambiguity lies in the use of the verb תנה to indicate the main action of the ritual. Although some versions[78] choose to render it "lament," the only other occurrence in Judges 5:11 indicates the action of recounting or retelling.[79] My preference leans toward recounting her decision (an active action) rather than lamenting her fate (a passive action).

"Instead of her flesh, what remains is the women's ritual word, a memorial for a virgin's death. . . . One cannot help but raise an eyebrow at the fact that the text wants to keep her as a perennial daughter, as her anonymity shows."[80] By making her a perennial daughter, Navarro Puerto argues, we celebrate her submission. Thus, it is very important that the commemoration takes place and the daughter's memory is kept alive, but the celebration of victimization is refused.[81] This process of

78. Niditch, *Judges*, 130: "Vat reads or glosses in translation, 'to bewail/sing a dirge,' and OL reads, 'to utter cries of lament.'" George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 303, prefers "to lament" because to him it "suits the construction and context better."

79. The remaining two texts in Hosea seem not to fit with either of these meanings (lament or recount), but they are not *Pi'el*.

80. Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, Sexismo, Silencio*, 59.

81. So also Exum, "On Judges 11," 139–40; *Was sagt das Richterbuch*, 40.

*Judges 11:39-40*

39At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that 40for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

yearly retelling and comforting each other gives birth to a new group, of whom we had not heard before, the "daughters of Israel."[82] Whether there is a historical kernel in this story or not, it has the potential for resisting the patriarchal glorification of the eternal virgin daughter—as well as the danger of buying into it. It also has the potential, as the appearance of the expression "daughters of Israel" indicates, to create particular communities.

These verses may be an etiology of a ritual of which we no longer hear in other texts of the Bible. Or they may be a literary device to leave a memento of this daughter turned companion. In her study on the possible historical roots of female models evident in Judges, Susan Ackerman notes that "for most of Israelite history, the ritual founded by Jephthah's daughter stands alone as an observance that commemorates a human character and her deeds."[83] Jephthah's daughter is like another nameless woman of whom Jesus said "what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mark 14:9; Matt 26:13). Jephthah's daughter will be remembered, as long as her story is told in a ritual or in a lectionary reading—however, always lacking a proper name.

### *Confrontation with the Ephraimites (12:1-7)*

At this point of the narrative, after the Ammonites have been defeated and Jephthah has been restored to his rightful position in Gilead, the questioning of the Ephraimites and the ensuing internecine war seems anticlimactic.[84] It is, however, never too late for reparation of

82. Corinne Lanoire, *Femme Fatales, Filles Rebelles. Figures Féminines dans le Libre des Juges* (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 2005), 159; Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, Sexismo, Silencio*, 60.

83. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 111.

84. To take a few examples, Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, 28, states that it "could be regarded as both a consequence and a repetition of the first victory"; while Schneider, *Judges*, 183, takes it to be the next crisis.

one's wounded honor, or so it seems.[85] The Ephraimites' verbal threat to destroy by fire Jephthah's house over him is ironic in that his house was destroyed by the fire of the sacrifice.[86]

This bragging or even the conflict does not justify the execution of forty-two thousand Ephraimites by the Jordan. The fact that only regional differences in dialect (reflected in one word's pronunciation) identify Ephraimites from their brothers shows how disproportionate the conflict and its resolution have become.

The episode signals both Jephthah's own tendency to see enemies everywhere around him (recall his first words to his daughter) and the increasing social disintegration, which will spiral down to almost total self-destruction at the end of the book.

### *Some Closing Thoughts on Jephthah*

Could the daughter not have returned from the memorial, and could Jephthah have taken back his vow? As one reaches the end of this judge's cycle (12:7), one realizes these are moot questions, for violence has escalated from one girl to forty-two thousand people (all warriors or also women and children? we are not told). Thus one realizes that Jephthah, like other men in Judges, prefers inflicting death to giving life, prefers to upgrade religious, social, gender, and dialectal differentiations rather than working for unity and justice. And the weakest members of society, notably women and children, are the first to pay for it; no wonder, then, that "the narrator shows the greatest interest in the issues of family relationships, sexuality and fertility."[87] But in Judges the public is private and the private is public. A father's decision involves not only his family. Although feminists tend to see Jephthah as a fool at best, Frymer-Kensky points out the failure of the state system to protect both the daughter from a father and the father from himself:

> Now that he is the chief of the Gilead family, there is no one to punish him. . . . There is also no one to whom a father can turn for help if he has made a careless vow that compels him to act against his own will and

85. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 206.

86. Schneider, *Judges*, 184, notes references to fire in Judg 9:20 and in Samson's story.

87. Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, 55. Interestingly, family relationships, sexuality, and fertility are usually considered female concerns, and perhaps Adrien Janis Bledstein's suggestion, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire on Men Who Play God?," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (1993), 34–54, that Judges is a satire written by a woman, is not so far-fetched.

*Judges 12:1-7*

12:1The men of Ephraim were called
to arms, and they crossed to Zaphon
and said to Jephthah, "Why did you
cross over to fight against the Am-
monites, and did not call us to go with
you? We will burn your house down
over you!" 2Jephthah said to them,
"My people and I were engaged in
conflict with the Ammonites who op-
pressed us severely. But when I called
you, you did not deliver me from their
hand. 3When I saw that you would not
deliver me, I took my life in my hand,
and crossed over against the Ammo-
nites, and the LORD gave them into my
hand. Why then have you come up
to me this day, to fight against me?"
4Then Jephthah gathered all the men
of Gilead and fought with Ephraim; and
the men of Gilead defeated Ephraim,
because they said, "You are fugitives
from Ephraim, you Gileadites—in the
heart of Ephraim and Manasseh."
5Then the Gileadites took the fords
of the Jordan against the Ephraim-
ites. Whenever one of the fugitives of
Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the
men of Gilead would say to him, "Are
you an Ephraimite?" When he said,
"No," 6they said to him, "Then say Shib-
boleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he
could not pronounce it right. Then they
seized him and killed him at the fords
of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand of
the Ephraimites fell at that time.
7Jephthah judged Israel six years.
Then Jephthah the Gileadite died, and
was buried in his town in Gilead.

> his own self-interest. . . . The story . . . is the turning point of the book of Judges. It is the first hint that lack of control over heads of families is a crucial flaw that will ultimately lead to the destruction of the social order.[88]

What exactly led the daughter to leave her father's house to greet him with timbrels and dancing, probably knowing of his vow, we will never know. "Not knowing why Jephthah took his vow suggests that any misstep could result in tragedy, and not knowing whether she was actually killed prevents any resolution. The reader waits for salvation—why doesn't somebody stop the sacrifice and rescue the daughter?"[89] Once again the narrator tells us much and at the same time leaves us with more questions than answers. Scholarly bibliography and artistic representations of this story are so numerous that it is an impossible task to cover everything; at the same time, such abundance is a tribute to the narrator's skills and to the Bible's poignant ways of addressing difficult issues.[90]

88. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 116–17.

89. Ibid., 115.

90. See also Esther Fuchs, "Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (1993), 116–30.

What other concerns might one guess were in the biblical writers' minds? Child sacrifice is one reason why this story is told. While for many people it was not only acceptable but honorable (even if at an enormous cost for the family), for the Deuteronomist it was wrong. Without openly condemning it, the writer shows the awful consequences of rash vows, from the first one by Othniel in Judges 1 (which turns out well, though, according to patriarchal standards) up to the one against giving wives to the Benjaminites in chapter 21. Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter "changes neither the relationship between Jephthah and God, nor that between Jephthah and the people of Gilead. Thus, the absolute ending of the relationship between Jephthah and his daughter through the sacrifice preserves the status quo of the other relationships. It could also be argued that these other relationships are in fact strengthened through the sacrificial event, since Jephthah thereby gives proof of his loyalty both to God and to the people."[91]

Mercedes Navarro Puerto appreciates the use of irony to warn against blind obedience: "Irony shows *in extremis* the consequences of obedience to the father, questioning the mandate itself. It brings up the consequences of setting in parallel obedience to the father and obedience to G*d."[92] One main issue in the book is that of the exaltation of self-sacrifice, a great concern to feminists because of the harm it has produced and still produces in many women throughout the globe. Beryl Ann Ingram puts it this way: "Self-sacrifice *functioning as an uncriticized moral norm* has crippling personal effects on those who seek to be responsible, moral, and faithful Christians. It is my contention, in other words, that when allowed to function this way, self-sacrifice is detrimental to women's moral agency."[93] It is also notable that Tamarkin Reis's analysis—in which the daughter (yes, a spoiled brat but still a daughter) gets her independence from work by manipulating her father and turning his vow into an advantage to her—has received very little attention from feminists.

While there is much about Jephthah, his unnamed daughter, his wife, and the society he is said to have been part of that we do not understand or do not know, it is clear that almost anything can be taken in one sense or another, as restrictive or as liberating. Much would depend on how well we take the system's restrictions, thus appreciating the degree of

91. Sjöberg, *Wrestling with Textual Violence*, 31.

92. Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio*, 57. The author chooses the form "G*d" to speak of the Divinity in such a way that it reminds us that "no name or gender is appropriate" (28).

93. Ingram, "Feminist Rereading," 13. Emphasis in the original.

freedom within those boundaries; that the system within which the daughter moves is patriarchal and restrictive is not news, and it is patriarchal and restrictive to Jephthah as well, but in quite different manners.

## Ibzan from Bethlehem; A Man with as Many Sons as Daughters (12:8-10)

"After him Ibzan from Bethlehem judged Israel" (12:8). "After him" is, narratively, after Jephthah's rule over Gilead for six years, which in turn comes after his victory over the Midianites. How long afterward is never an issue in Judges, so that some interpret the judges as following one after another. On the other hand, if the notice in Judges 18:30 is taken literally (the reference to Moses'/Manasseh's grandson as the Levite serving at Dan), then it would have been impossible for the judges to rule one after the other.

Ibzan is also one of those judges with no ancestry and a large progeny—unlike Jephthah, whose ancestry is mentioned (Gilead) but who cut off his progeny with his vow. Ibzan comes from Bethlehem, where he judged Israel for seven years, died, and rested there. Noteworthy is the way in which the narrator tells about Ibzan's negotiations to marry his children and increase his influence over the area, sending the daughters to marry outside his clan. It is noteworthy, first, because we are given very little information about this judge: just three verses. Second, in a society in which sons are more valued than daughters, he fathered thirty of each; his thirty daughters served him to establish or ensure political and social networks with thirty other families from "outside."

**TRANSLATION MATTERS**

The NRSV translates verse 9: "He gave his thirty daughters in marriage outside his clan and brought in thirty young women from outside for his sons." While I consider that the intent of this exchange with "the outside" is marriage, the narrator refrains from using the common phrase "give/take as wife" (נתן / לקח אשה). Furthermore, it is not clear that these transactions occurred with people from other tribes or only from other families. At any rate, "to take a woman" as an expression for marrying sounds objectifying; all the more so when the only expressions used are "send to/bring in from the outside."

Where they were sent is unspecified; החוצה is used in general in contrast to an inner place, such as Lot and his family being taken from their home in Sodom before its destruction (Gen 19:17); Joseph fleeing from

*Judges 12:8-10*

[8]After him Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. [9]He had thirty sons. He gave his thirty daughters in marriage outside his clan and brought in thirty young women from outside for his sons. He judged Israel seven years. [10]Then Ibzan died, and was buried at Bethlehem.

Potiphar's house (Gen 39:13); Amnon expelling Tamar from his room after raping her (2 Sam 13:7); or the inner part of the Holy of Holies, whose contents could not be seen from outside (1 Kgs 8:8). What is its meaning in this case? Other families from Bethlehem? Other regions within Israel? Other lands, like Solomon later on? To find thirty homes into which his daughters could be married and thirty homes from which to bring in (causative of בוא) thirty marriageable girls for his thirty sons would mean a larger span than just his village.

## Elon the Zabulonite (12:11-12)

Again one of the judges is introduced with the scantest possible information about his family life, his time of office, or even his abilities.

Of this man it is only said that he judged Israel for ten years (interestingly, in such a short notice "he judged Israel" is repeated); he died and was buried in Aijalon in the land of Zabulon (in Hebrew, the two proper names Elon [אילון] and Aijalon [אילון] have the same consonants except for a duplication of a י; his name would seem to be almost a toponym). Unlike some of the other judges in this section of the book, there is no information about his family or his lifestyle (no donkeys to ride, cities built in his name, or children's marriage contracts).

## Abdon the Son of Hillel (No Mother Named), the Pirathonite (12:13-15)

Although verse 13 gives the lineage of Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite, it does not help much in identifying this man. "Pirathon" in Judges 12:15 is used to refer to a place "in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites"; it is Abdon's place of birth and of burial (see also v. 13). These are the only references to this place in the Hebrew Bible except for a certain Benaiah of Pirathon, one of David's commanders (2 Sam 23:30; 1 Chr 27:14).

*Judges 12:11-15*

[11]After him Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel; and he judged Israel ten years. [12]Then Elon the Zebulunite died, and was buried at Aijalon in the land of Zebulun.

[13]After him Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel. [14]He had forty sons and thirty grandsons, who rode on seventy donkeys; he judged Israel eight years. [15]Then Abdon son of Hillel the Pirathonite died, and was buried at Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the hill country of the Amalekites.

Abdon judged Israel eight years. This is not much time to rule. Abdon had forty sons and thirty grandsons, all of whom used to ride on asses (v. 14). There is a correspondence between these seventy children and the seventy sons of Gideon, killed by their half-brother Abimelech.[94] How he managed to get such an outstanding social position is not stated, but it is clear that he did not get all of these (family, money to provide for their needs, including servants and animals) in those eight years of office.

Sons and grandsons, and prestigious patriarchs are present in these chapters and are more notable than in other stories, since there are no wars or killings to obscure their status. Women are not present, even in these prosperous times. Except for the thirty daughters that Ibzan sent away and the thirty wives brought in for his sons, daughters are absent, even though one may imagine a similar exchange of brides between families in order to ensure political and economic alliances and healthy descent through intermarriage. Also, wives, *pîlegeš*-wives, prostitutes, counselors, mothers, and female judges, warriors, or prophets (to name some of the women in Joshua and Judges) are absent from these stories.

In an ironic compensation, the next chapters will include several hundred women, from Manoah's wife (Samson's mother) to the girls abducted in Shiloh. Most of them did not fare very well. Neither peace nor war, belonging to Israel nor being foreign to this people, nor their marital status ensured them safety in a society where every man (and very few women) did what he thought right for himself.

94. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 194.

# Judges 13:1–16:31

## *Samson the Danite*

"The story of Samson is a story about women. Just try to imagine it without them." With these words J. Cheryl Exum starts her chapter on Samson's women.[1] Judges 13–16 tells the story of the last judge of this book (not Israel's last judge), the picturesque Samson. His otherworldly strength, his politically incorrect attitudes toward the oppressor and toward women, and his designation as a נזיר ("consecrated," "Nazirite") from before his birth make him an extraordinary character. Labels such as "singular and unique, privileged to enjoy a special connection with God,"[2] "outsider,"[3] and "brawny, bawdy, amoral adventurer"[4] have been given to him. While some comments about him seem to stem from anger, he also generates sympathy, sorrow, and perhaps disorienta-

1. J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*, JSOTSup 163 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 61.

2. Yairah Amit, *The Book of the Judges: The Art of Editing*, BibInt 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 280.

3. Roger Ryan, *Judges*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 105: "I also understand him as an 'outsider', because even though Israel has cried out to Yahweh for rescue from Philistine oppression (10.7-10), Israel no longer wants to be delivered."

4. Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 208.

tion: what kind of a judge, not to speak of a hero, is this man? Like the riddles he was fond of, his story is itself strange.[5] The cycle includes the announcement of his conception and birth (chap. 13), his several clashes with Philistines, his particular relationships with non-Israelite women, and his death together with three thousand–plus enemies at the temple of Dagon (15:1–16:31). I would advance that these encounters were destructive to many, despite theological explanations attributing Samson's actions to his being stirred by YHWH's Spirit.

The cycle begins with the often-repeated note in Judges of Israel's unfaithfulness and YHWH's response by allowing a foreign power to oppress them (13:1). This time the oppressors are the Philistines, who had already been Shamgar's foes (3:31; 10:6-11). The cycle finishes with the note on Samson's burial place, the same as his birth place, "between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel twenty years" (16:31), half the time of the Philistine oppression. Samson's is the longest account on a judge in this book and the only one starting with a divine announcement of his birth.

Chapters 14 and 15, and more loosely 13 and 16, are arranged in parallel sets, evidencing literary quality and theological intention.[6] This parallelism is achieved through the repetition of certain words (go up, go down, appear, see, know, bundle, animals) or structures. For instance, Manoah asks four questions (Judg 13) and Delilah asks Samson four times (Judg 16) how to counter his strength. Another way of seeing the structure is that there are recurring themes in the cycle, such as a broken vow or conflicting allegiances.[7] A more detailed structural analysis points as well to the real struggle: unlike the Philistines' focused interest on Samson, Samson may be distracted by the women he sees.[8] How will he be able to save

5. Barry Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 346.

6. We assume the composite character of the cycle and its literary unit in its present form. See Marian Broida, "Closure in Samson," *JHS* 10 (2010): 2–4; Jichan Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), 1–114 on previous scholarship on the cycle. J. Cheryl Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga," *JSOT* 19 (1981): 3–29, is by far the most cited work when it comes to structure.

7. For instance, James L. Crenshaw (*Samson: A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1978], 65), while considering it might have more than a teaching, believes "the primary purpose of the saga was to examine competing loyalties," particularly those toward the parents as opposed to those generated by "erotic attachment"; Joseph Blenkinsopp ("Structure and Style in Judges 13–16," *JBL* 82 [1963]: 65–76), believes the plot runs along the breaking of the Nazirite vow.

8. Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 386.

Israel when it is unclear whether he will save himself? And how are we to assess the three women he sees (and wants) when they are at the center of the conflict but are not the real actors in this conflict? Finally, what are the respective deities' roles in this conflict? Enjoy a good story!

## Tidings of Samson's Conception and Birth (13:1-25)

By using the announcement of a hero's birth type-scene, the author brings the audience into familiar territory; a hero is about to be born. It is a story of "promise and fulfillment," crafted in a ring composition centered on a barren wife giving birth to Samson.[9] A divine messenger comes to the anonymous wife of a certain Manoah while she is alone and announces to her what is to happen and what are the requirements for her and the son she will bear. She must "be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean," and the son to be born must never cut his hair (vv. 3-4). Although the messenger does not call her a נזיר, abstention from vine products and from impure things are among the Nazirite requirements according to Numbers 6:2-8. Since this is the only example we have of a נזיר vow imposed on someone prior to his or her birth, comparison to the requirements as presented in Numbers 6 is risky.[10] This is also the only example I can think of in which a mother shares with her fetus a particular, sacred status. This should not be extraordinary, given the close biological and symbolic connection between mother and fetus, but it evidently was not a preoccupation of the biblical authors and thus was not recorded.

Two other characteristics of this message are noteworthy. One is the announcement that Samson will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines; a prediction that may be understood either as him being the first one to fight them or as being unable to complete the job.[11] The second uncommon element is the silence by the messenger about the name to be given to the son.

Structurally, the central character of the chapter is the divine envoy and the message.[12] Jichan Kim notes that the narrator uses the motif of

9. J. Cheryl Exum, "Promise and Fulfillment: Narrative Art in Judges 13," *JBL* 99 (1980): 44–45.

10. Hannah's offering of Samuel to YHWH at Shiloh also involves a mother and a special child (who is also a judge), but the term נזיר is not used in 1 Sam 1 and nothing is said of Hannah's special status.

11. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 296 n. 90.

12. Exum, "Promise and Fulfillment," 46.

*Judges 13:1-25*

13:1The Israelites again did what was
evil in the sight of the Lord, and the
Lord gave them into the hand of the
Philistines forty years.

2There was a certain man of Zorah,
of the tribe of the Danites, whose name
was Manoah. His wife was barren, hav-
ing borne no children. 3And the angel
of the Lord appeared to the woman
and said to her, "Although you are
barren, having borne no children, you
shall conceive and bear a son. 4Now
be careful not to drink wine or strong
drink, or to eat anything unclean, 5for
you shall conceive and bear a son.
No razor is to come on his head, for
the boy shall be a nazirite to God from
birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver
Israel from the hand of the Philistines."
6Then the woman came and told her
husband, "A man of God came to me,
and his appearance was like that of
an angel of God, most awe-inspiring; I
did not ask him where he came from,
and he did not tell me his name; 7but
he said to me, 'You shall conceive and
bear a son. So then drink no wine or
strong drink, and eat nothing unclean,
for the boy shall be a nazirite to God
from birth to the day of his death.'"

8Then Manoah entreated the Lord,
and said, "O Lord, I pray, let the man
of God whom you sent come down to
us again and teach us what we are
to do concerning the boy who will be
born." 9God listened to Manoah, and
the angel of God came again to the
woman as she sat in the field; but her
husband Manoah was not with her.
10So the woman ran quickly and told
her husband, "The man who came to
me the other day has appeared to me."
11Manoah got up and followed his wife,
and came to the man and said to him,
"Are you the man who spoke to this
woman?" And he said, "I am." 12Then
Manoah said, "Now when your words
come true, what is to be the boy's rule
of life; what is he to do?" 13The angel
of the Lord said to Manoah, "Let the

knowing–not knowing throughout the cycle to "[share] with the reader the omniscience that the characters in the narrative lack. Thus he [*sic*] puts the reader on the inside, among those who know, and causes him [*sic*] to side with the divine purpose and against the plans and interests of the characters."[13] In this chapter, the addressee of the information is the mother-to-be, while Manoah has to catch up after her. He gets the important information from his wife's report on this otherworldly encounter. Her report includes these elements: her realization that the man of God was more than a regular human being, that she is pregnant, and

13. Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 413.

woman give heed to all that I said to her. 14She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine. She is not to drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. She is to observe everything that I commanded her."

15Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you." 16The angel of the Lord said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat your food; but if you want to prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the Lord." (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord.) 17Then Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your words come true?" 18But the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful."

19So Manoah took the kid with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to him who works wonders. 20When the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground. 21The angel of the Lord did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of the Lord. 22And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." 23But his wife said to him, "If the Lord had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these."

24The woman bore a son, and named him Samson. The boy grew, and the Lord blessed him. 25The spirit of the Lord began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

that the boy is to be consecrated as a נזיר. She does not report *verbatim*, however, but omits two of the four angelic statements. "By omitting elements (b) ["for you are pregnant and you will bear a son"] and (c) ["a razor shall not come upon his head"], the woman's report suggests a different connection between the command not to drink wine or beer (a) and the child's status as a Nazirite (d)."[14] In other words, the result is the association of wine prohibition to Samson, not to his mother. And this noteworthy mental slip has prevailed and still prevails in most people's (including academic people's) minds. Not only does Samson's mother erase part of the message, but she also adds to the angel's words that Samson will be a נזיר until his death. This addition has been interpreted in several ways. For some, she, like Eve (Gen 3), "exercises remarkable

14. Exum, "Promise and Fulfillment," 49.

freedom in interpreting the sense of a directive from the Lord."[15] Others detect prophetic overtones in her words. In particular I am reminded of Jeremiah's call prior to his birth, which he felt as a heavy burden. James Crenshaw thought that the mother imposed the vow on her yet unborn son; however, it seems to me that neither the mother nor Samson had much chance to resist YHWH's announcement (Samson did resist it by his way of living, but that happened later).

Manoah is not satisfied with receiving the message through his wife's report and prays that the man of God be sent "to us" (v. 8). Barry Webb notes that the messenger had said nothing about the father's role in this matter, so that Manoah wants to know what is expected of him as the household's head. Feminists are less merciful toward Manoah and understand his prayer either as discomfort at being sidestepped or as mistrust of his wife's role as a messenger for the divine.[16] That the main addressee is the wife is made evident as the angel comes again when she is alone, in response to Manoah's prayer (v. 9). And worse yet, the herald conveys no new information but only directs Manoah to do what his wife has been instructed; curiously, the instructions repeated (and condensed) have nothing to do with Manoah's question but with his wife. This means, as demonstrated by Susan Ackerman, that there is a religious role for the woman, not only for her son.[17] It would not be possible to say "independently of" her son, for it is related to his conception, and there is no mention of any religious activity prior to this event. It is true that she has more understanding of the angelic presence and of Israel's traditions (as she says YHWH would not appear to them, give them such a mission, and kill them on the spot) than her husband and does not press the messenger for his name. Still, she is nameless and her presence is tied to her becoming Samson's mother.

While Yairah Amit attributes to literary convention the author's downplaying of Manoah to his wife's benefit, Adele Reinhartz elaborates on

15. Crenshaw, *Samson*, 74. This is a good insight, perhaps prompted by Crenshaw's idea that the Samson cycle is a sort of midrash on Gen 2:24.

16. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 353–54. Also Exum, "Promise and Fulfillment," 50, and *Was sagt das Richterbuch den Frauen?* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1997), 45, wonders if he is "asking for something more than the revelation of Nazirite status."

17. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 113–15. Ackerman explores religious possibilities open for women in the pre-monarchic period; see especially 89–127.

her anonymity as a way to highlight her ties to the divine messenger.[18] Reinhartz, Renate Jost, and other scholars suggest the possibility of the angel being the biological father of the child, leaving for Manoah the role of social father. Although this possibility might at first sight seem far-fetched, there are certain keys in the text that allow, at least, for uncertainty as to the father's identity—a repeated literary motif and one of patriarchy's fears.[19] Some reasons for this suspicion are the following: the angel meets the woman privately twice, the first encounter occurring in the field (see Deut 22:25-27); only after meeting the messenger alone for the second time does the woman call her husband. Another clue comes from the verbal forms used. While the verb בוא (v. 6) is ambiguous and does not always imply sex, there is no mention of Samson being procreated by Manoah, as is usual after a birth announcement (see, for instance, Gen 18:10). This absence may seem unimportant, but it is not. It touches on one of patriarchy's favorite polarities, that of harmless and dangerous women. The faithful and obedient (and, if possible, abstaining from sex, despite evidence to the contrary!) wife and teaching mother is the ideal female, while the enticing woman who uses her sexuality is dangerous. In other words, sex for procreation or for men's pleasure is right, but sex for the woman's pleasure or for other purposes is wrong. Thus, Manoah's wife, Samson's mother, is the ideal Israelite woman and one of the few mothers mentioned in this book. Since Samson's erotic life (more insinuated than narrated) is a strong theme in the following chapters, the contrast is even stronger, and the silence about this woman's sexual life (even if in order to conceive Samson) is an important ideological element.

This is the only direct announcement to the mother involving a divine messenger without mediation by a human male except for YHWH's announcement to Hagar in the desert and to Mary in Luke 1 (with a wording slightly different from the LXX of Judg 13:5).[20] In the end, unlike Jesus', Samson's true paternity is never revealed to us.

18. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 298; Adele Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 159–60.

19. Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 166, quotes Josephus' *Ant*. 5.276-80, which interprets Manoah's questioning of the messenger as a jealous reaction.

20. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 292–93, offers a comparative chart of Judg 13 and divine manifestations to Abraham (Gen 18:1-16), to Jacob after leaving Laban (Gen 32:32-33), and to Moses and Gideon on their appointments as leaders (Exod 3:1–4:17; Judg 6:11-24); from the headings of her chart it can be deduced that all these other encounters are directed to men. Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 243–44 also makes the connection with Jesus's birth announcement.

**TRANSLATION MATTERS**

There is a curious expression in Judges 13:3, where the angel states, הנה־נא את־עקרה ולוא ילדת והרית וילדת בן. The last two verbs are perfect tense verbs with consecutive ו ("you will be pregnant [הרה] and will bear a son [root ילד]"), after the messenger's statement, "Look: you are barren and have not given birth; you will conceive and give birth to a son." While speaking again to the woman, in verse 5 the same two verbs appear in an expression that can be translated in various ways. The difficulty lies in that the same root הרה here may indicate an adjective or a verb, "you are pregnant" or "you will become pregnant," and the second, וילדת, is an irregular conjugation of a verb (root ילד) with meanings ranging from "to conceive" to "to give birth," which may be read as a past or a future action and, if slightly revocalized, also as a participle.[21] This same exact formula appears also in verse 7 (the woman's report to her husband) and in only one other text, when YHWH announces to Hagar that the child she is pregnant with, Ishmael, will one day be a free and mighty man (Gen 16:11). There, the first term, הרה, clearly refers to a past action: she is pregnant already. Thus, the verb would permit us to translate it in Judges 13:5 also in the past: "you have conceived" rather than "you will conceive." It is an ambiguous formulation, thus allowing for either interpretation. An added argument comes from another corner. According to Reinhartz, "In keeping with her speech-act analysis, Bal suggests that for the biblical narrator, word and deed are the same; the promise of fertility is at the same time the act of fertilizing. Bal argues that the encounter with the angel has a symbolic sexual aspect, which is signified most subtly by the woman's knowledge."[22]

Perhaps realizing there is no further information for him or remembering his obligations as a host, Manoah invites the "man of Elohim" to a meal but is instructed to offer instead a sacrifice to YHWH. When he finally realizes the nature of his guest, he becomes frightened. Tongue in cheek, Amit concludes that "in contrast to Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, and

21. George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), 317, translates it as future; Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, AB 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 217, has "you are already pregnant" (in v. 5), followed by Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 306, 310–11 and others; Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 66–67, takes the first announcement in v. 5 as future and the second one in v. 7 as past action.

22. Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 167, quoting Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 73. So also Renate Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht in der Anthropologie des Richterbuches* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), 220.

Ezekiel who, following the divine revelations, received the reassurance of God or his messenger, Manoah was obliged to make do with the sensible explanation of his wife. . . . In this story, the task of reassuring the one who has seen God's face is transferred from God to the sensitive woman, who analyzes the situation logically."[23] Are we to see this delegation of comfort as a second-place prize or as God's commissioning, making a sensible woman God's messenger, that is, angel? Gender stereotypes usually allot to women the task of comforting wounded or frightened people (men and women, adults or children), supposedly based on being attuned to nature and feelings (over against logical thinking), to maternal instinct (even if those to be comforted are not their children), or because it is an *ad honorem* activity (there are professional comforters of different types, from "comfort women" to nurses, clergy, and others, but here I am speaking more generally of the unpaid, often informal, domestic activity). Divine consolation, however, is hardly seen as a female attribute.

### *An Unnamed Mother's Son Named "Sunny"*

Judges 13:24 reports the fulfillment of the divine promise: "The woman [still unnamed] bore a son, and named him Samson. The boy grew, and YHWH blessed him. And YHWH's Spirit began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol," which was his home (see 16:31). To Manoah's question about the angel's name, a wonderful name had been pronounced (13:18). Now this family sees what that meant, not only in the boy's birth, but in his being blessed.

The mother alone names the child. Unlike Hagar or Mary, she is not instructed what name the child will have, and the text is silent about Manoah's opinion on this. She chooses a name that would fit his mission as נזיר and savior of his people. "Samson" derives from שמש, "sun," and there could be an ancient connection with a sun deity. To what degree the nature of that connection is here cultic or mythic is hard to say, since nothing in Judges speaks to this issue: Israel is accused of many cultic infidelities but not of worshipping the sun. The term "is from ancient words which mean 'strong,' 'fat' and 'to serve' because that is just what he becomes: Yahweh's strong servant, who shines with strength like the

23. Yairah Amit, "'Manoah Promptly Followed His Wife' (Judges 13:11): On the Place of the Woman in Birth Narratives," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (1993), 149.

rays of the sun, a noble, powerful and distinguished hero."[24] If Roger Ryan is right and the "*on* ending of his name is an ancient affectionate form meaning 'little,'" I am inclined to consider it another of his mother's prophetic insights.[25] Since Samson will only *begin* to save Israel, he will be Sunny, not The Sun. Yes, he will be strong and will be noticed, but he will end up in darkness, made sport of, and tortured. At first this idea of the mother's curtailing his destiny by this name is outrageous; however, Abel, Nabal, Mahlon and Killion, and other poor fellows condemned by their naming to a diminished existence attest to this literary game. And unfortunately, from time to time reality slaps us with some crime story involving an abusing mother. I am not positing maltreatment of Samson by his mother; I am extending her prophetic responsibility beyond the noticed addendum of "until his death" to her naming him "Little Sun."[26] At any rate, I find it ironic that the one who is nameless in the story has the authority to name her son.

### *Womanhood, Wifehood, Motherhood*

By stressing the female, this chapter slightly balances the obscurity of mothers in the rest of Judges. It also balances the traditional model, in which the household's head, the husband, speaks to strangers, invites guests to stay over, and names the son.[27] Here, by divine will, the woman is addressed—not once, but twice—and she alone. This kind of story needs to be weighed against others in order to try to determine to what extent it is extraordinary. Family models vary quite a bit in the Bible, and, sadly, we are often left in the darkness on several issues. According to Carol Meyers, families in the Bronze Age needed every member,

24. Ryan, *Judges*, 100–101.

25. Ibid., 101.

26. According to Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 200, before his birth "she took it on herself alone to communicate with the messenger who 'fertilized' her. She also put the verdict on her son's life, stipulating that the Nazirite vow hold, not only 'from the womb' but also 'until the day of his death.'" Other rash vows involving fathers and daughters (Caleb and Achsah, Jephthah and his daughter, the Israelites who do not want to give their daughters in marriage to Benjamin), happen often in Judges; this one involves a mother and her son.

27. Think, for instance, of Abraham receiving the divine guests, who actually have come to announce to Sarah that she will have a child but do not see her (Gen 18). In other instances, such as Gen 19 or Judg 19, the male deals with the guests, but there is no birth announcement.

with their differentiated, gendered tasks and responsibilities in order to survive.[28] And since procreation meant survival, it is no small wonder that in a birth narrative the main character is the one to become a mother.

Although the story presents Samson's mother as wiser and faster in understanding than her husband, she is cast in traditional roles only. Starting from her deferral to her husband during the divine visit to the last mention of her in 14:5, her only roles are those of wife and mother. She does not have a name, a patronymic, or an occupation by which to be identified. Not only that: she is so passive that she does not even express any frustration at being barren, does not pray or nag her husband (unlike the matriarchs or Hannah), does not question the way this is going to happen, and does not express her consent to the divine plan (unlike Mary in Luke 1:38). Amit sees this as intentional, in order to set Samson's mother and Manoah as "representatives of a generation who does not turn to God" even in their distress.[29] This may be true on one level, but it is equally true that she is portrayed as "acting on behalf of her husband's patriarchal agenda: first, by omitting any description of her background . . . or any description of her point of view (does she even want a child?); second, by having her subordinate herself to Manoah in the matter of questioning the messenger . . . ; third, by denying her any hint of sexual pleasure in her task of procreation,"[30] and fourth, by restricting her to the traditional roles of wife and mother. Biblical imagination makes so much of motherhood (especially if it is to a son) that it takes for granted women's desire for motherhood and interprets its lack to YHWH's disfavor toward the woman (male barrenness is repressed in the Bible, of course). "In Israelite society, barrenness might be viewed as a sign of reproach and divine displeasure."[31] Thus, being a barren married woman receiving the announcement of a son with a particular relationship to YHWH is good tidings. It is, however, an imposition from YHWH on her, on her husband, and on the son.[32] The text is curiously silent about the wishes of Samson's mother either before or after the

28. Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) has alerted us to the importance of women, especially women of childbearing age, in pre-monarchic Israel.

29. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 298.

30. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 116.

31. Exum, "Promise and Fulfillment," 47.

32. Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 223, considers unimaginable in a traditional society to ask whether a woman would have wanted a child.

event. Unlike the matriarchs or Hannah, she is not said to be desperate for a child—nor does she sing a thanksgiving song in YHWH's honor (cf. 1 Sam 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55). Her silence may be interpreted as the often-encountered androcentric bias of not allowing a female voice to be expressed but rather putting male concerns on women's lips. Since in Judges most women are dissociated from motherhood and most mothers are remarkably absent, it should not come as a surprise that Manoah's wife is allowed no utterance on motherhood.

The last verse of the chapter works as a hinge between this story and the next one in this cycle: in order for YHWH to start delivering Israel, it is necessary for Samson to start moving. YHWH's Spirit will stir him in ways unexpected and still hard to discern.

## Samson's Wedding and Break Up (14:1–15:16)

Judges 14–15 tell a sad story. Samson is a youngster who feels at home in a foreign country—at home enough to wander around, see a Philistine woman, like her, and decide to marry her. Is he to be blamed for that? Anybody raised in a borderland is used to interacting with "the others" across the river or a boundary, with whom they share "more in common than remote capitals want them to believe. If nothing else, the mere fact that they live close to one another tends to encourage interaction and cooperation."[33] Why would he not feel at home crossing over to Timnah or Gaza? Did his parents keep him protected from exposure to "the world"? Hardly, it seems. Although we do not have a description of his upbringing, we are told that he grew up with God's blessing. Yet, even if he grew already as an uncommon lad, his parents were not ready for his request or for what turned out to be a wedding party gone memorably wrong.

Probably no other biblical character (except for John the Baptist in the New Testament) has been so much associated with the wild as Samson, and with good reason: he is nourished by nature (honey, water), lives for a while in a cave, uses jackals and jawbones as weapons, and lets his hair grow. Susan Niditch has likened him to the trickster of several folkloric tales.[34] Starting with David Bynum's realization that "Samson thrives in

33. Steve Weitzman, "The Samson Story as Border Fiction," *BibInt* 10 (2002): 161; see also 160 n. 8 on the difference between border and frontier.

34. Susan Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 622–24.

the wild and begins to falter once he enters Philistine society," Gregory Mobley looks at three oppositions through which Samson's depiction as a liminal hero can be detected: "The interplay of field/house maps out the spatial zones in these narratives. The opposition agitation/rest delineates the spectrum of behavior characteristic of men in each of these zones. Through isolation of the male/female opposition, we can discern the modes and rites that mediate the movements of passengers between these zones and states."[35] In short, Samson's cycle gives much to ponder and to enjoy in terms of a good story.

### *The Wedding Preparation (14:1-9)*

On his trip to Timnah, Samson noticed a woman and decided to marry her. Details on the whys, hows, whens, or how longs of this decision are not provided to the readers. Neither are names offered, except for Samson's. Those details that are given point toward the fact that he is going to trespass several boundaries, as Barry Webb notes:

> In "seeing" a woman and demanding to have her he blurs the distinction between love and lust. In wanting to marry a *Philistine* woman he breaks the ethnic and religious taboos that support the current social order, and in demanding that his *father and mother* get her for him he overturns normal family relationships (v. 2). If this beginning is any indication of what is to come, Samson looks like being more a chaos monster than a deliverer.[36]

The narrative offers three different assessments of the situation: Samson is moved by his eyes and seems not to have doubts about what to do. The Philistine woman was "the right one in Samson's eyes."[37]

35. Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 37. Bernhard Lang, "The Three Sins of Samson the Warrior," in *Berührungspunkte: Studien zur Sozial- und Religionsgeschichte Israels und seiner Umwelt. Festschrift für Reiner Albertz zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ingo Kottsieper, Rüdiger Schmitt, and Jakob Wöhrle (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2008), 186, also notes the use of the number three in the Samson cycle, and relates it to the authors' use of the Herculean model of "illegitimate acts [by a warrior] as a series of three sins" in order to manifest their reservations toward the warrior.

36. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 365. Emphasis in the original.

37. This is J. Cheryl Exum's translation, "Wife of Samson," in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol L. Meyers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 246.

*Judges 14:1-9*

14:1Once Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw a Philistine
woman. 2Then he came up, and told
his father and mother, "I saw a Philistine woman at Timnah; now get her
for me as my wife." 3But his father and
mother said to him, "Is there not a
woman among your kin, or among all
our people, that you must go to take
a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father,
"Get her for me, because she pleases
me." 4His father and mother did not
know that this was from the LORD; for
he was seeking a pretext to act against
the Philistines. At that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.
5Then Samson went down with his
father and mother to Timnah. When he
came to the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion roared at him. 6The
spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he
tore the lion apart barehanded as one
might tear apart a kid. But he did not
tell his father or his mother what he had
done. 7Then he went down and talked
with the woman, and she pleased
Samson. 8After a while he returned
to marry her, and he turned aside to
see the carcass of the lion, and there
was a swarm of bees in the body of
the lion, and honey. 9He scraped it out
into his hands, and went on, eating as
he went. When he came to his father
and mother, he gave some to them,
and they ate it. But he did not tell them
that he had taken the honey from the
carcass of the lion.

Right in his eyes, just as every man did what was "right in his eyes" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) before they had a king, is either an ironic touch or a proleptic notice. It seems to me that, in retrospect, Samson was inadvertently pointing to his mission as deliverer by setting himself, the woman who was right in his eyes, and many Philistines into a situation YHWH would use to deliver Israel.[38] Tammi Schneider notes that Samson has started to dismiss his mother (see his command in v. 3), who had more understanding about YHWH's plans in Samson's first stages of life. This dismissal "may be an early sign of the beginning of his trusting the wrong women, leading to his personal ruin."[39]

38. This is my informed guess, since the root ישר is used in Judges only in the two verses that refer to the Timnite wife (14:3, 7) and in 17:16 and 21:25, two editorial remarks about the lack of a king. Another possible argument is provided by Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 364, who states that "the narrative syntax linking 14:1 with the last clause of chapter 13 suggests that Samson's trip to Timnah was the first consequence of the Spirit's activity in his life."

39. Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges: A Commentary*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 203.

A second assessment of the situation is the one from his parents, who react in a very conservative way. They suggest marriage to a woman from the same tribe or at least from the same people and refer to the Philistines as "foreskinned," an expression taken by some scholars to indicate effeminate.[40] In this assessment, the narrator explains that this/she (the demonstrative pronoun הִיא indicates either) was from YHWH in order to start to liberate Israel from the Philistines (14:4). In Judges the Philistines alternate between a powerful, oppressive nation (implied by their great numbers at the Gaza temple, the stories in 1 Samuel, and archaeological finds) and a group of dumb men who needed extra help from at least two women, the tribe of Judah, and Samson's suicidal surrender of Samson's secret in order to subdue him. Likewise, the skirmishes are rather local, guerrilla-style, on both sides: he is never said to have involved his tribe or his immediate neighbor Judah, and there is no battle report like those we read of under any of the other judges, from Othniel onwards, or under Saul.[41] A full assessment of satisfaction with these arrangements should include the bride's voice, and her family's, which we miss. Like Samson's mother and several other women in Judges, she is nameless and, for the moment, wordless. She will be allowed a voice in the story only when, hard pressed by her countrymen, she nags Samson to tell her his secret.

Samson's marriage is a sad story for several reasons: an occasion for celebration develops into general strife before Samson and his bride are able to carry on with their marriage. It is also sad for the way women are used as objects; for the number of people, fields, animals, and property hurt or killed in the process; and—not a small point—for the narrator's

40. David Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 216: "In Judges, Samson's encounters with Philistines and with women overlap almost exactly, and the stereotypes that generate these stories at some level conflate women and Philistines. Both represent the Other in relation to Israel's patriarchal and xenophobic mindset. The Philistines succeed in defeating Samson only when a woman helps them. Their means of fighting is womanish in the conventional sexist sense of using deceit rather than force. The sign of Israelite identity that most serves to exclude Philistines, circumcision, is a male sign that therefore also excludes women." See also Ken Stone, "How a Woman Unmans A King: Gender Reversal and the Woman of Thebez in Judges 9," in *From the Margins*, vol. 1: *Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 76–78.

41. Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," 622–24, shows that most judges shared characteristics of social bandits. Perhaps this would explain why there are no organized battles between Samson and his followers and the Philistines.

comment that all these struggles were YHWH's ways of stirring Samson against the Philistines, for it is highly noncomplementary to the Timnite or at least to all she represents. "In the Samson cycle, issues of masculinity, queer gender practice, and possibly sexual violence abound, enmeshed with ethnic hatred against the Philistines."[42]

Since Samson's parents could not talk him out of it, they went with him to Timnah to arrange for the wedding (here both parents are mentioned, yet only the father is mentioned at the wedding arrangements). The narrator adds that it was customary for the young men to offer a drinking party, and thus Samson did so (v.10). It was during this party that Samson put his famous riddle to the thirty companions selected to be with him. Did he have Philistine companions to control a foreigner or because none from Dan was with him? We do not hear much more about his tribe except when Samson is laid to rest (16:31).

Regarding his experience of finding honey on a lion's carcass, Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher notes that, although seemingly accidental, it shows two attributes that will mark Samson's future: his superhuman strength and his fondness for secrets. "This mixture leads subsequently to the first conflict with the Philistines," while the source of his strength will be protected as long as it remains unknown to the Philistines.[43] Barry Webb wonders if the unexpected encounter of a lion in the vineyards should not be read on another level. Vineyards are often associated with festivals, religious or not, with Israel's relation to YHWH, with luxury (including sexual), and with the cultured world, since vineyards require longstanding effort to produce wine.

> Since it is a wild animal, its presence in the vineyards is incongruous and unexpected. As a beast of prey it threatens not only Samson's wedding plans but his very existence, and therefore his destiny. In some ways it is like Samson himself, a beast that breaks boundaries, untamable and unstoppable, driven by animal instincts. . . . Of course, at the surface level of the narrative it is external to Samson. . . . But if the vineyards have more than surface significance, so, too, may this lion. It represents the wild, out-of-control aspect of Samson's nature that threatens to destroy him if it is not mastered.[44]

42. Susanne Scholz, "Judges," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 121.

43. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzählte Welten im Richterbuch*, BibInt 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 160.

44. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 367.

Webb's comment aligns with those by Mobley and others who see in Samson a liminal creature, between wildlife and culture, encampment and city.[45] It is intriguing that animals are significant in Judges yet, as far as I have been able to determine, no studies are available on them as part of the plot of Judges. That the lion in the vineyard may point to another, deeper reality, is also perceived by Ryan. For him, however, it was first of all a sign to Samson himself, that he would be able to fight the Philistines "single-handedly. The arrival of Yahweh's Spirit at the right time when he faces a threat is also for his own personal encouragement. If he can kill an attacking lion, he can kill Philistines. Samson may lack Israelite support, but he is not alone."[46] I find this approach challenging and refreshing. When a people is not ready to be saved, not even God can do much about this; thus, the first one to be convinced that there is salvation at hand is Samson himself.

### *The Wedding Feast (14:1-20)*

The wedding feast is characterized by: (a) its association with drinking (the Hebrew term משתה, "banquet," derives from שתה, "to drink"); (b) its duration of one week, with mention of the fourth and seventh days (and an impossible chronology); (c) its guests making it an "all-boys" party (the only ones mentioned are the thirty men chosen by the Timnites to accompany/guard Samson); and (d) its location somewhere in Timnah, the bride's territory. The main characteristic of this feast is its relationship to strong drinking and boasting. Throw a party with abundant alcohol for thirty-something men, one of whom is the one who took the girl but is also scorned for being from an occupied people, and you have the perfect recipe for a brawl. The author's reason to include these data, however, is not dislike of fights (which are supported by the narrator as YHWH's occasion to make trouble) but rather denunciation of Samson's leaning toward the peoples of the land's ways of behaving, which would ensnare Israel.[47]

Finally, the wedding is also characterized by the mounting tension between the local inhabitants and the foreign bridegroom. This tension detonates with a riddle-contest that, judging from the diversity of

45. Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero*, esp. 37–48.

46. Ryan, *Judges*, 107.

47. As discussed above in relationship to the angel's message to his mother, I am unconvinced that prohibition of vine products pertained to Samson and that he was thus neglecting his *nāzîr* vow.

*Judges 14:10-20*

10His father went down to the woman,
and Samson made a feast there as
the young men were accustomed to
do. 11When the people saw him, they
brought thirty companions to be with
him. 12Samson said to them, "Let me
now put a riddle to you. If you can ex-
plain it to me within the seven days of
the feast, and find it out, then I will give
you thirty linen garments and thirty festal
garments. 13But if you cannot explain it
to me, then you shall give me thirty linen
garments and thirty festal garments." So
they said to him, "Ask your riddle; let us
hear it." 14He said to them,

"Out of the eater came something
to eat.
Out of the strong came something
sweet."

But for three days they could not ex-
plain the riddle.

15On the fourth day they said to
Samson's wife, "Coax your husband
to explain the riddle to us, or we will
burn you and your father's house with
fire. Have you invited us here to im-
poverish us?" 16So Samson's wife wept
before him, saying, "You hate me; you
do not really love me. You have asked
a riddle of my people, but you have

comments on it, remains a riddle. With such extended parties there must have been several sources of entertainment, including, but not limited to, contests of wit. Whether Samson was a skilled wise man or YHWH inspired him at the moment we do not know. In fact, the unit offers two riddles and a retort in the form of a proverb. Since Samson proposes it as a thirty-against-one contest, much is at stake in terms of material gain (thirty linen garments used as underwear and thirty festal garments) but even more is at stake in terms of honor, for a riddle is a contest or evaluation of the other's knowledge and skill and an occasion for boasting.

### The Riddle, a Riddle (14:14, 18)

Reactions to Samson's riddle are probably as varied among biblical scholars as they were among the thirty Philistines whom he challenged. The text does not record their reactions, but one may imagine them, trying to solve it during the whole feast, between drinks, food, and other entertainment. There must have been those who thought hard, those who dismissed it as impossible, those who discredited Samson rather than search for a possible answer to the riddle, and of course those who involved the woman-wife in its resolution.

James Crenshaw studies the riddle in the context of wisdom and marvels at its artistry, involving alliteration (four of the six words start with "m" in Hebrew: מהאכל, מאכל, מעז, מתוק), sexual innuendoes, synonymous

not explained it to me." He said to her, "Look, I have not told my father or my mother. Why should I tell you?" [17]She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted; and because she nagged him, on the seventh day he told her. Then she explained the riddle to her people. [18]The men of the town said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down,

"What is sweeter than honey?
What is stronger than a lion?"

And he said to them,

"If you had not plowed with my heifer,
you would not have found out my riddle."

[19]Then the spirit of the LORD rushed on him, and he went down to Ashkelon. He killed thirty men of the town, took their spoil, and gave the festal garments to those who had explained the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father's house. [20]And Samson's wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.

parallelism, and phonetic similarities between the terms for food, האכל, and for eater, אכל. He further contends that "the narrative *demands* just such a riddle."[48] Of course, it cannot be easily solved because of its trappings: in the context of a wedding feast, "vomit" or "sperm" would be more expected answers to the riddle than "lion" or "honey," given the semantic connections between eating and sex. And, given the fact that only Samson knew the answer because it stemmed from his own experience, it was, to say the least, a foolish bravado, "a deliberate provocation," a clear message to the Philistines that he is not to be controlled so easily, even by the more sophisticated and ruling men of the city.[49] Provocation or not, it ended up in a massacre, because they were finally able to produce their response to Samson on the seventh day of the feast. They were able because they found Samson's weak point, his Timnite wife. The text blames these maneuverings on the Philistines, who threatened to burn the woman and her father's house if she did not coax Samson to give the solution. Nonetheless, the only words allowed to the woman in the whole story are those used to coax Samson, weeping to him that he did not love her enough to share his riddle with her. In other words, she is telling him, "What side are you putting me on: with you or with the thirty men who are to guess the riddle? If you love me, put me on

48. Crenshaw, *Samson*, 113, but see 99–120 on its literary mastery. Emphasis in the original.

49. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 372.

the side of those who know the answer." She speaks, however, of "my people," a word already indicating her position between both parties if not on her people's side.

Crenshaw sees here a very important clue to the whole cycle: "Look, I have not told my father or my mother: why should I tell you?" (14:16). It is the tension between allegiance to the paternal house or to the one whom one is attracted to by *eros*. His answer shows that, at least at this point, Samson leans toward filial love.[50] On the seventh day, however, he tells her the secret. That she nagged him until he gave in is the narrator's assessment; that a strong man would be able to resist the roaring lion but not the crying wife is a typical patriarchal motif—one that still operates. It is permitted a woman to nag and cry but not to fight back or get angry.[51]

The solution of the riddle was offered as a new riddle, in the form of two questions. The answer is also set in parallel phrases and alludes to another classic theme in proverbs, love as stronger than anything else (remember the sages' words, "love is strong as death," Song 8:6).[52] Enraged, Samson accuses them of having had sex with his woman/wife in order to get the answer to the riddle. Whether he interprets the cipher "heifer" as indicating this intimacy or whether he just chooses to be insulting to her while letting the men know what he thinks of their ability is hard to say, but either way it is not complimentary! There is here another irony: this Timnite here and Samson at the end of his life are performing tasks usually ascribed to animals.[53] This animalization of women will take yet another, most horrific spin in Judges 19, with the Levite sacrificing his *pîlegeš*-wife.

Yes, it was much more than a riddle that was at stake. "The solution of the riddle is an event serving to test the relations among the figures

50. Webb, however, thinks this was a weak excuse, since he had already pushed his parents aside, disobeyed them, and even manipulated his mother into eating unclean honey by not telling her where it had come from (ibid., 373).

51. J. Cheryl Exum, "The Many Faces of Samson," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson*, ed. Erik Einykel and Tobias Nicklas, TBN 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 14, notes that only when he is in love he puts himself in danger, not when only sexual desire is at stake.

52. On the difficulties of the riddle, see Jeremy Schipper, "Narrative Obscurity of Samson's ḤYDH in Judges 14.14 and 18," *JSOT* 27 (2003): 339–53; Azzan Yadin, "Samson's *Ḥîdâ*," *VT* 52 (2002): 407–26, claims it was not a riddle but, following the Greek weddings, it was a *skolion* or "capping song."

53. Crenshaw, *Samson*, 119.

participating in the incident: the relations of Samson and his wife, those between his wife and her Philistine countrymen, and those of Samson with the Philistines."[54] I am not sure whether Samson was so wise as to set up a trap to check on these relationships or fool enough to think that the Timnite would side with him. Since he had made clear to her his filial allegiance (v. 16), why would he expect her to act differently and take his side, in Philistine territory, with thirty companions set up to watch him closely (and a threat, of which Samson did not know)? Samson will still take part in a worse case of self-defeat in chapter 16. As will be discussed there, it is noteworthy that Delilah is blamed by many scholars (not to speak of artists) for doing what she had announced three times that she intended to do. The difference with the Timnite's betrayal of his secret is that this time perhaps he had not yet learned that his breaking all boundaries did not make him a Philistine or a city man. Furthermore, as Mark Bartusch notes, it is not Delilah but "Samson's apparent failure to maintain the important distinction between insiders and strangers that leads directly to his downfall."[55]

Enraged by what he perceived as betrayal, Samson left Timnah, went to Ashkelon, killed thirty men, stripped them naked and paid his wager. As often noted, his motivation is vengeance or, in this case, paying his debt and getting the steam out of his system. And even though YHWH is said to be behind his actions, it still looks more unfair than other war games, for here unsuspecting men (not soldiers) are slaughtered. On the other hand, that is, unfortunately, one of war's rules: you win; you take spoil (we are reminded of Sisera's mother, Judg 5:30).

The last verse of the chapter seems to put an end to this couple's misadventures. In a patriarchal fashion that will be later imitated by King Saul (1 Sam 17–18), Samson's wife/woman was given away. One may take the father's actions as a desperate effort to save his family's face, or as a counter-trick against Samson, for "the one who has the woman has the status."[56] At the same time, one cannot but feel that the woman is handled as a package left where it is less embarrassing and noticeable.

54. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 269.

55. Mark W. Bartusch, *Understanding Dan: An Exegetical Study of a Biblical City, Tribe and Ancestor* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 156.

56. Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," 621.

### *A Bad Beginning, a Worse End (15:1-5)*

In chapter 15 is the last episode of Samson's relationship to the family in Timnah. "Some time afterward" Samson goes to his wife/woman's home in order to seek reconciliation with her through sex. As we know from the last verse of chapter 14, however, she has in the meantime married someone else.

Her father explains to Samson the situation and offers him instead his younger daughter, whom he introduces as "better than she" (15:2). This is one of the most forgotten characters in the Bible. She is nameless, voiceless, and her only characteristics are these two: offered as better than her sister, yet rejected as a consolation prize. This offer recalls other biblical stories, such as Laban's exchange of Leah for Rachel and Saul's handling of Merab and Michal into and out of marriages and persecution. That this father has the habit of arranging for his daughter's marriages is no news; she is treated like merchandise offered in the hope of "killing two birds with one stone." Perhaps disappointed but definitely aggrieved, Samson once again wants vindication and sets on fire the village's surrounding wheat fields, orchards, and olive groves by tying three hundred foxes or jackals in pairs and putting a torch between each pair of tails (15:4). The wild man turned their fields into wasteland by using wild animals gone even wilder because of the fire torches. He is "an 'Adam-gone-wrong' whose mastery of the animals is violent and exploitative rather than responsible, and in the service of war rather than peace."[57] Ryan rightly points out that this is not impulse but guerrilla warfare, for "the burning of enemy produce is the smart military tactic of a guerrilla fighter and a threatening act of intimidation which requires strategic planning and considerable preparation."[58]

### *"Collateral Damage": Always the Elderly, Women, and Teenagers (15:6-17)*

The next episode is the end of the Timnite's family. Sure enough, the Philistines reacted to his fire provocation and, since they could not get Samson to pay for it, turned against the Timnite family who had been his in-laws. In the end, the anonymous woman married to Samson, her father, and his household (including the younger sister?) were burned by their own countrymen in an awful act against their own, weaker

57. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 377.
58. Ryan, *Judges*, 112.

*Judges 15:1-5*

15:1After a while, at the time of the wheat harvest, Samson went to visit his wife, bringing along a kid. He said, "I want to go into my wife's room." But her father would not allow him to go in. 2Her father said, "I was sure that you had rejected her; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?" 3Samson said to them, "This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame." 4So Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took some torches; and he turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. 5When he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves.

members. The threat with which the thirty companions had exacted Samson's secret was realized, this time with no warning. Samson's next massacre is in vengeance for his wife's family's death, in the best Israelite tradition: "Since you act this way, I will surely take revenge on you. And afterward I will stop" (Judg 15:7).[59] Webb notes "some evidence of rationality here."[60] No longer attached to the Timnite family and sickened by this latter event, Samson sought refuge in a cliff. Perhaps he thought he would be left in peace there, but there had been too much blood spilled, too many strong warriors wounded in their honor, too much provocation and a sense of humiliation that no man boasting of his manhood could let go.

After the Timnite woman and her family were killed by their countrymen, not by an enemy people or even one single enemy, the tables will be turned and the Judahites will give away Samson to the Philistines. The episode happens at a place that will receive the name of Ramath-Lehi, Jawbone Hill, because of Samson's use of a fresh jawbone as a club. Putting military pressure on Judahite territory, the Philistines manage to get three thousand Judahite men to get Samson bound and given over to them. This is not a Philistine versus Israelite war of liberation; it is "anything counts when it is right in my eyes." Judah has moved from being the first tribe to obey YHWH in possessing their promised land (1:1-2) to coming up "with new ropes to betray rather than with

59. According to Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry," 8, the verb נקם indicates a redress when the legal system does not impart justice.

60. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 379.

*Judges 15:6-20*

6 Then the Philistines asked,
"Who has done this?" And they said,
"Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite,
because he has taken Samson's wife
and given her to his companion." So
the Philistines came up, and burned
her and her father. 7 Samson said to
them, "If this is what you do, I swear I
will not stop until I have taken revenge
on you." 8 He struck them down hip and
thigh with great slaughter; and he went
down and stayed in the cleft of the rock
of Etam.

9 Then the Philistines came up and
encamped in Judah, and made a raid
on Lehi. 10 The men of Judah said,
"Why have you come up against us?"
They said, "We have come up to bind
Samson, to do to him as he did to us."
11 Then three thousand men of Judah
went down to the cleft of the rock of
Etam, and they said to Samson, "Do
you not know that the Philistines are
rulers over us? What then have you
done to us?" He replied, "As they did
to me, so I have done to them." 12 They
said to him, "We have come down to
bind you, so that we may give you into
the hands of the Philistines." Samson
answered them, "Swear to me that you
yourselves will not attack me." 13 They
said to him, "No, we will only bind you
and give you into their hands; we will
not kill you." So they bound him with

weapons to fight."[61] Agreeing to be given up, Samson only asks not to be attacked by them. Samson is given over, and YHWH's Spirit, absent for a while from these petty affairs, burns his ropes and bonds, so that a fresh jawbone becomes a mortal weapon against a thousand men. "The hidden agency of God is very hidden in this part of the Samson story. No reference to Yahweh is made from 15:1 until 15:14. . . . The ridiculous inadequacy of Samson's weapon underscores the supernatural quality of his strength. God's agency is hidden, but effective."[62] Neither Samson, Deborah, nor YHWH have managed to move Dan or Judah to fight for a dignified life. One tribe deserts its territory and looks for another one as far from Philistia as possible. The other tribe is happy to stay quiet under foreign rule. Deliverance can only begin—with a jawbone, courage, and supernatural strength.

### Still . . .

I cannot say how Samson, the Philistines of the region, and the people who tried to live quietly in the area, growing their grains and animals, praying to their gods, and seeking good neighborly relations, felt about

61. Ryan, *Judges*, 114.
62. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 219.

two new ropes, and brought him up from the rock.

14When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him; and the spirit of the Lord rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. 15Then he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached down and took it, and with it he killed a thousand men. 16And Samson said,

"With this jawbone of a donkey,
heaps upon heaps,
with the jawbone of a donkey
I have slain a thousand men."

17When he had finished speaking, he threw away the jawbone; and that place was called Ramath-lehi.

18By then he was very thirsty, and he called on the Lord, saying, "You have granted this great victory by the hand of your servant. Am I now to die of thirst, and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" 19So God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came from it. When he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore it was named En-hakkore, which is at Lehi to this day. 20And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

so much spilled blood. Perhaps they grew so used to war, rape, and death that they did not dare to dream of another world. Perhaps those on the ruling side (the Philistine lords, not everyone) grew so used to being the strongest in the region that they got totally disoriented when someone like Samson confronted them barehanded. I do not know how they felt. But if my own sickness with so many wasted lives (which I encounter only in the narratives; I do not have to see or smell corpses or lose loved ones) is any measure, they all must have been either longing for a break or letting their hearts turn to stone.

It does not help that Judges contemplates no intermarriage, interreligious gatherings, or other intercultural encounters for Israel. When two nations or two parts of the world demonize each other, there is no possible exchange but that of bullets and missiles; we see that happen now as then. The question is: how can Judges help us move away from war and death to worship; how can we understand that utter destruction of the other (by setting up an army to go up against another army, by burning, or by any means we have witnessed so far) is not YHWH's will for a people? As Ryan puts it, "The storyteller points the reader's sympathy—not to the threatened or displaced inhabitants, but to Israel's abandoned deity."[63] A clue is to be found in the realization that from the

63. Ryan, *Judges*, 130.

beginning many did what was right in their own eyes, not in YHWH's eyes, each generation surpassing the previous one in evil.

### A Thirsty Judge (15:17-19)

Verse 17 tells the etymology of a little place with a spring called "the partridge" or "the one who claims," from the root קרא. According to legend, after fighting and killing a thousand men with the לחי, "jawbone," Samson was dehydrated and, for the first time as far as we know, he prayed. Notice that after having ascribed to his own power his bloody deeds (v. 16), now he introduces his request by acknowledging God's help in his fights. YHWH opened there a spring in which Samson quenched his thirst and regained his spirit. Jichan Kim sees an indication that Samson was not ready to ascribe his power to YHWH: the consonants of לחי may be read as "the combination of the preposition *l* and the substantive adjective *ḥy*, meaning 'to the Living One (who revives man [*sic*]).' Samson, however, after being revived, named the place 'y*n hqwr*', 'Spring of the caller' (15:19). And this puts the supplicant . . . before the Supplier. Again we are reminded of Hagar's well *lḥy r'y*."[64] It will take Samson's experience of being near death, humiliated, and stripped of his strength to recognize who has sustained him throughout.

By now we know, as the text's ancient audience knew, that God writes straight with crooked lines. Yet, the characteristics the text holds up as heroic, even if tacky to modern sensibilities, should not distract us from the marginal character of Samson and of Israel vis-à-vis the Philistines. This is a trickster's ploy, which means it is "about status and power games."[65] As Steve Weitzman astutely notes, we are at the border, where the imposed culture needs to deal with ambiguities and uncertainties, trying to bring in order. Thus, he contends, the riddle is an "unsettlement story, meant to explain how the Philistines lost control of the land and its inhabitants. At the beginning of the story, the Philistines dominate Israel, but their power begins to unravel thanks to Samson. . . . And just when the Philistines seem about to reassert their control, Samson destroys their temple, striking at the symbolic and social core of their world (Judg. 23–32 [*sic*])."[66] Things were hardly clear in those days. This unlikely hero, apparently a Philistine fan, a "constitutionally asocial" man, judged Israel

64. Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 428.
65. Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," 620.
66. Weitzman, "The Samson Story as Border Fiction," 170.

for twenty years and was able, by destroying their temple and deity with his bare hands, to start to save Israel from their grip.[67]

### Recapitulating before Moving Forward

The Samson cycle is comprised of two sets of parallel thematic patterns, as already noted earlier.[68] How these similar and dissimilar elements are played out and to what purpose is part of the delight of listening to a good story. So far we have seen Samson's promising birth, his being stirred by YHWH and in turn stirring the Philistines into conflict, his attachment to one non-Israelite woman who exacted his secret for the benefit of the ruling Philistines.[69]

There are very diverse opinions about Samson, from those who wonder how YHWH could choose someone so unlikely, to those who see a loner in a frontier situation, doing his best to carry out YHWH's plan with all odds against him. Gender and feminist studies have added an element to the analysis, looking at Samson's mother's important role in chapter 13, at his "womanizing" tendency, at his animalization and feminization at the time of his imprisonment, and at the separation of women into "good ones" (the mother) and dangerous ones (the three women in chapters 14–16). We are about to read about the second of Samson's liaisons with a woman.[70] While many commentaries consider these liaisons dangerous, we may ask: dangerous for whom? Actually, so far it has been particularly dangerous for the two Timnite women, the one Samson married and her sister. When the three women with whom Samson relates are looked at together, any bad connotation of any one of them redounds to the others. This is dangerous for all women, but not necessarily for Samson. Let us read carefully, trying to sift what is really said of each woman and each relationship.

## *A One-Night Stand (16:1-3)*

Chapter 16 starts with words very similar to those that open chapter 14. In Judges 14:1, "Samson went down to Timnah"; in 16:1, "Samson went to Gaza." Then follows the expression "and he saw there," וירא־שם, and the object of his sight: in 14:1, "a woman, אשה, in Timnah from the Philistines," and in 16:1, "a woman of fornication or a harlot, אשה זונה, and he went in unto her."

67. "Constitutionally asocial" comes from Mobley, *Samson*, 2.
68. Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry," 3–29.
69. Ibid., 7.
70. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 221.

*Judges 16:1-3*

16:1 Once Samson went to Gaza,
where he saw a prostitute and went in
to her. 2 The Gazites were told, "Samson
has come here." So they circled around
and lay in wait for him all night at the
city gate. They kept quiet all night,
thinking, "Let us wait until the light of
the morning; then we will kill him." 3 But
Samson lay only until midnight. Then
at midnight he rose up, took hold of the
doors of the city gate and the two posts,
pulled them up, bar and all, put them on
his shoulders, and carried them to the
top of the hill that is in front of Hebron.

By using the same structure, the authors invite the audience to prepare themselves and think, "Oh, I know this guy. Is he going to have a happy relationship this time?" but then the information sinks in: the woman he visited is not the kind of young, virgin girl one marries. She is defined by a term usually translated "harlot." Phyllis Bird, a pioneering feminist scholar, often uses "fornicator" as a way to include all possible meanings of the verb זנה. This verb indicates any sexually improper behavior on the part of a woman, thus it could mean prostitution but also fornication or even, as we will see in chapter 19, leaving one's husband without his consent.[71] There is much discussion about this term's implications, but it is clear that here it refers to a woman who does not live under the authority of a man (father or husband) and enjoys certain sexual freedom. The truth is that, in the end, we do not know what it meant in concrete terms, even if we keep the traditional rendering: Did it apply only to street girls? Did it apply also to costly "companions," such as those offered today in expensive hotels and conferences? At least in some stories (biblical and extrabiblical) the זונה could very well be a prostitute, a bartender, or a single woman. For instance, Rahab lives alone at the city gates, although she has a family (Josh 2, 6). And the two women fighting for one baby who come to Solomon for judgment in 1 Kings 3 could be single mothers, who managed to live together and have their children by sharing a home. It is possible but not obligatory that

71. See Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), esp. "'To Play the Harlot': An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor," 219–36, and "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," 197–218; "Prostitution in the Social World and the Religious Rhetoric of Ancient Israel," in *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. McClure (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 40–58.

these women needed to prostitute themselves to survive or to complement their income.[72] Furthermore, in the *Gilgamesh Epic* Enkidu, also a wild man, is introduced to civilization (and tamed, much to his dismay) by Shamhat, a courtesan—or a harlot (according to most translations). "As seductress, instructor (adviser), and temporary caretaker Shamhat symbolizes woman in two cultural aspects, the unknown but desirable feminine and the mother/socializer."[73] Shamhat, our woman from Gaza, and Delilah are liminal women, as far as we know unmarried and unattached to a patriarchal household, and, because of this, good candidates for bringing a wild man into city life. And also, good candidates to have been regarded with suspicion by the patriarchal system they inhabited.

Focusing again on the Gaza lady, she is, like the Timnite, a nameless object of Samson's desire. She lives in Gaza, but we do not know what is her age or ethnic identity: Israelite, Philistine, or other? If we believe Judges 1:18, Gaza had been taken by Judah (see also 6:4). Unlike the Timnite affair, there are no wedding arrangements, no contest or party. A harlot is a woman who sells sexual favors and is free to engage with whomever she wants, can, or is ordered to (if unfree); "promiscuity, payment for sex, and lack of an emotional bond between the partners"[74] are the main characteristics of her job and, in general, confidentiality in terms of patrons. The whole event takes only one and a half verses: he saw, he went in unto her, he got up in the middle of the night, he left. Oh yes, he took the city gates (doors, posts, bar, and all) as a souvenir with him and left them on a hill facing Hebron (16:1, 3)! The center of the scene is "Samson's interest in women. All major episodes involving

72. It should be noted, moreover, that the participle זנה/זונה appears at times as a noun and sometimes, as here, as adjectival to "woman." I am haunted by this variation in use, which so far eludes any explanation. There seems to be a more casual or nonprofessional nuance in "woman of fornication," "woman judge," or other such formulae; see my *Women at Work in the Deuteronomistic History* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013), 23–30. I have borrowed heavily from my book in this paragraph.

73. Julia Asher-Greve, "Decisive Sex," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2–6, 2001*, vol. 1, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 14–15.

74. Thomas A. J. McGinn, "The Legal Definition of Prostitute in Late Antiquity," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 42 (1997): 74, quoting Kingsley Davis, "The Sociology of Prostitution," *American Sociological Review* 2 (1937): 744–55. See also Christine Stark's definition in *"Kultprostitution" im Alten Testament? Die Qedeschen der Hebräischen Bibel und das Motiv der Hurerei*, OBO 221 (Göttingen: Academic Press Fribourg/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 57.

him contain women as his main objective. Other judges in the book had many women/wives, but references to these women were always noted in connection to children and inheritance or power, never in the context of a character's sexual appetite."[75] These insights are very important for a feminist analysis of the story. They do not blame the women for what is Samson's weakness. I live in a society in which "bed affairs" are seen as far worse than cheating on taxes, bending laws, and other political and economic mischief, which eventually affect thousands of people for generations to come. While I am against prostitution because of its oppression particularly but not exclusively of females, I am also against moral double standards. Thus, while Samson's sexual appetite is evident, use of women for inheritance or for power games, as other judges did, is equally utilitarian.

Verse 2 situates this seemingly personal event in the larger context of the conflict between Samson and the Philistines. It was told to the Gazites that Samson had come into the city, and so they lay in wait to catch him in the morning. Since women often worked as bartenders at the city gates (and perhaps also as prostitutes), it would not have been any secret that Samson had entered her realm. After all, if the Israelite spies were unable to keep their mission secret (Josh 2), why would Samson? And why would he want to, since he had nothing to fear? On the contrary, he may have been seeking "a safe house in enemy territory" in order to attempt a new blast against the Philistines.[76] Again the text is ambiguous enough to stir our imagination.

One may suppose it would have been safer to fight in the daylight and not in the dark, and Samson would have been exhausted from a night of much sex and little sleep (or no sex at the Gazite motel, but still little sleep). I wonder, nonetheless, to what degree the men's waiting for him is not male complicity. They did not need to wait until he came out in the morning: they could have broken into the harlot's house and gotten Samson *in flagrante delicto*. Yet, as happens often even in the face of sexual crimes, many men do not react out of patriarchal complicity, though often unconsciously. A prostitute is a woman who is liminal, despised yet sought after; and enemies may be enemies, but when it comes to seeking a safe woman other than the wife, the prostitute is needed and thus, somehow, taboo for most men. Perhaps out of gentlemanly retribu-

75. Schneider, *Judges*, 218.

76. Ryan, *Judges*, 120, who shows the ambiguity of the terms זונה and בוא (come into) and prefers the nonsexual option of "bed and breakfast." The text is ambiguous on purpose, making hard any attempt to solve it.

tion Samson left earlier, and, as noted by Yairah Amit, he refrained from killing those ambushed Philistines.[77] With regard to Samson's attachment to Delilah, to which we will soon turn, Kim notices that

> the narrator succeeds in convincing his [*sic*] audience of the potential threat posed by the fact that the eyes of the Philistines meanwhile are constantly glued to Samson. Thus balanced symmetry highlights the contrast between Samson and the Philistines: Samson is busy with searching for *a woman* whereas the Philistines are determined to overpower *Samson*. That is why the Delilah affair is decisive.[78]

It may well be that Samson's eyes are on Delilah as they were on the Timnah and the Gaza women earlier in his life, but Delilah is enlisted by Philistine lords, who are the ones seeking Samson's defeat or death.[79] Thus, the Philistines' eyes are not only on Samson but also on Delilah, the only difference being that one seeks pleasure or love from her and the others seek a secret revealed. Are we falling into the authors' trap by reacting to Samson's story with epithets such as "womanizer"? Is it not rather that what is at stake is "the male worldview that finds expression in the biblical literature" and only tells us about Samson's weakness and about male fear of female sexual allure?[80] After all, Judges 15:20 tells us that Samson judged Israel for twenty years: are we to assume that he only sought prostitutes during that period?

## Samson Bound by Love (16:4-20)

The Samson cycle may be structured around four different women, but they are not equally dangerous to him or to the patriarchal system (conversely, Samson was not equally dangerous to each of them). Men seeking to kill him, not the Gazite prostituted woman, are dangerous for Samson. And, granted, there is also something in Samson himself that attracts him to danger.

Connecting the first event at Gaza with the next one, the narrator continues in verse 3: "After that Samson loved a woman named Delilah, from the wadi of Sorek." Delilah has no patrilineage, no nationality, no family, but she has a Hebrew name, a house, and a resourceful spirit to

77. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 285.

78. Kim, *Structure*, 392. Emphasis in original.

79. Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 246–47.

80. J. Cheryl Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," in *Judges and Method*, ed. Gale A. Yee, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 67.

*Judges 16:4-20*

4After this he fell in love with a
woman in the valley of Sorek, whose
name was Delilah. 5The lords of the
Philistines came to her and said to her,
"Coax him, and find out what makes
his strength so great, and how we
may overpower him, so that we may
bind him in order to subdue him; and
we will each give you eleven hundred
pieces of silver." 6So Delilah said to
Samson, "Please tell me what makes
your strength so great, and how you
could be bound, so that one could
subdue you." 7Samson said to her, "If
they bind me with seven fresh bow-
strings that are not dried out, then I
shall become weak, and be like anyone
else." 8Then the lords of the Philistines
brought her seven fresh bowstrings
that had not dried out, and she bound
him with them. 9While men were lying
in wait in an inner chamber, she said
to him, "The Philistines are upon you,
Samson!" But he snapped the bow-
strings, as a strand of fiber snaps when
it touches the fire. So the secret of his
strength was not known.

10Then Delilah said to Samson,
"You have mocked me and told me
lies; please tell me how you could be
bound." 11He said to her, "If they bind
me with new ropes that have not been
used, then I shall become weak, and
be like anyone else." 12So Delilah took
new ropes and bound him with them,
and said to him, "The Philistines are
upon you, Samson!" (The men lying
in wait were in an inner chamber.) But
he snapped the ropes off his arms like
a thread.

13Then Delilah said to Samson,
"Until now you have mocked me and
told me lies; tell me how you could be
bound." He said to her, "If you weave

survive. Given the scarcity of love stories in the Bible, the fact that he loved her is important. We are told of her intention but not of her feelings and reasons to accept the Philistine offer: coercion, money, fear, prestige? Perhaps—ventures Carolyn Pressler—she had heard of the Timnite's fate and sought a different solution to the Samson problem.[81] Perhaps she was an opportunist. Perhaps she was not free to reject the lords' offer. Perhaps like Jael, this was not her war and all that bravado between both parties, that male thing that only produced deaths and destruction, had to be definitely finished.[82] "Delilah's power lies in Samson's sexual attraction to her. . . . Delilah's power also lies in her emphasis on her own weakness, and in her ability to nag. . . . Delilah also derives

81. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 222–23.

82. Susan Ackerman, "What if Judges Had Been Written by A Philistine?," *BibInt* 8 (2000): 37, compares Jael to Delilah, both "outsiders within their stories, playing a role within an ethnic conflict that is not necessarily their own." She also compares Delilah to Judith, confronting alone a warrior foe and using her charms.

the seven locks of my head with the web and make it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else." [14]So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web, and made them tight with the pin. Then she said to him, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web.

[15]Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me three times now and have not told me what makes your strength so great." [16]Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death. [17]So he told her his whole secret, and said to her, "A razor has never come upon my head; for I have been a nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head were shaved, then my strength would leave me; I would become weak, and be like anyone else."

[18]When Delilah realized that he had told her his whole secret, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, "This time come up, for he has told his whole secret to me." Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her, and brought the money in their hands. [19]She let him fall asleep on her lap; and she called a man, and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. He began to weaken, and his strength left him. [20]Then she said, "The Philistines are upon you, Samson!" When he awoke from his sleep, he thought, I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him.

support from the males around her. This derivative power is a kind of secondary power, which she can also use, albeit on conditions, and on the men's terms."[83] Susan Ackerman wonders whether her image would not be more a Jael-like image had she not betrayed an Israelite. For she "goes about her mission of discovery with determination and courage (given that Samson could conceivably turn on her at any moment) and who ultimately triumphs, like the adroit David over the hulking Goliath, over her more powerful foe."[84] Renate Jost rejects comparison with Jael because Delilah has sided with the powerful, hierarchical princes, not with the egalitarian model of society represented by the wild, Samson, and Israel.[85] Jost's contributing voice to our volume deals with the value of a Samson figure for a persecuted community.

83. Carol Smith, "Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?" *JSOT* 22 (1997): 53.
84. Ackerman, "What If Judges," 35–36.
85. Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 248–49.

### *Samson and the Suicide Bombs Today*

Samson may be understood as a liminal figure, moving between the Israelite and the Philistine worlds.[86] Samson represents the radical antithesis to the superior Philistine culture.[87] His religious and political power is based on his strength, legitimated by YHWH. His strength carries him to oppose the Philistines. In the exilic and postexilic times Samson could become a figure to identify with in the fight against the superior foreign power, but also a prototype of the social outsider in a state or in culture.

In a previous publication, I summarized my understanding of the story thus:

> The historical context in which the narrative probably originated and was transmitted presents another point of departure for understanding it. The narrative reflects pre-national conditions while its final version was completed in the postexilic period: both times when Israel, or Judah, was itself threatened or oppressed by other nations. Told in such a context, a story like the Samson saga had a liberating character from the viewpoint of the humiliated; it said to them: "God is on your side." This reading is problematic when such a text is read in the context of the rich Western European and North American churches belonging to the dominant culture. Saying "God is on your side" in this context would turn on their heads the statements about a God who is on the side of the weak. In the primary communities of Latin America, where marginalized women and men gather to draw strength from the biblical stories for their struggle to survive, such a story looks different—as it does in the long history of Jewish suffering. In Jewish congregations, the Samson narrative can still be heard as an empowering story for a persecuted minority. But, even in a Jewish context, a changed political situation can lead to a problematic understanding. Thus an Israeli Jew has described as the "Samson syndrome" the wish of some Israelis to destroy the whole Arab world along with themselves rather than permitting any

86. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 77. On the concept of liminality, see Victor Turner, *Das Ritual: Struktur und Anti-Struktur* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2000), 52–54. Samson's marginality is indicated by his lifelong status as Nazirite.

87. See Jost, *Gender, Sexualität und Macht*, 52–54.

> approach to the Palestinian Arabs as their neighbors. John Hamlin comments that it is the same attitude that threatens our whole world when it contemplates an atomic war that would mean the destruction of all parties in the struggle.[88]
>
> This narrative acquires renewed relevance against the background of the suicide bomb attacks in Paris, Nice, London, Brussels, Berlin, Stockholm, Egypt, and other places. Can Samson be identified as the first terrorist attacker in world history? At first sight it would seem so, since Samson dies with his enemies, the Philistines. There are, however, many elements to dismiss this connection. I would like to mention two of them:
>
> First, one must carefully note a difference between what the text of Judges describes and death because of faith, *Kiddush Ha-Shem*, in Jewish tradition. *Kiddush Ha-Shem* means "Holiness of God's Name" through the life of a Jewish person. The focus centers on life. Only in exceptional circumstances should dying be allowed as Holiness of the Name.[89] Second, a feminist hermeneutic also speaks against such a reading. From its beginnings feminist theology has understood itself as a movement toward changing foundational androcentric and patriarchal structures in theology, church, and society. It is not tied to one gender. Feminist theology endeavors to establish a transformed paradigm of academic theology, which takes into account diversity and difference and which sets justice at its center. To it belong gender justice, social and economic justice, equal rights, and respect for other religious points of view. Thus, these values should not be confused with an ideology such as the one held by the Islamic states that have claimed authorship of the majority of suicide attacks in Europe and the Near East.
>
> *Renate Jost*

88. Renate Jost, "God of Love / God of Vengeance, or Samson's Prayer for Vengeance," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4, 2nd ser. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 123–24; see also E. John Hamlin, *At Risk in the Promised Land: A Commentary on the Book of Judges*, ITC (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1990), 140.

89. I thank W. Stegemann, "Sterben oder töten für Gott. Märtyrer oder Killer?" (unpublished, 2002) for this insight. See also the different traditions of martyrdom in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, as argued by Stegemann.

Delilah may be many things, but she is not a liar. She was quite clear on what she wanted. Especially ominous is her question in verse 6: "How could you be bound, so that one could subdue you?" The verb used for "subdue" is the *Pi`el* form of ענה, which has the connotation of humiliating, mistreating, submitting to a hard situation, raping. Given what we know of treatment of prisoners, it is not unthinkable that the verb would have here such a connotation as well. On his third answer to her, Samson changes the hypothetical "if they": "when you weave the seven locks of my head with the web." Looms and spindles are traditionally female tools, found in archaeological remains close to ovens and hearths.[90] In the Hebrew Bible, the root ארג, "to weave," is used only in the feminine for Delilah and the women who wove for the goddess Asherah (2 Kgs 23:7). "There is a parallel between Samson's association with the loom in the third test with Delilah and Herakles' use of a spindle during his servitude to Omphale. But the image of a man having to perform this kind of 'woman's work' can be found in 2 Sam 3:29, and is part of a wider motif about 'warriors becoming women' found in other biblical passages, and in Mesopotamian and Hittite curses."[91] "Warriors becoming women" and men being associated with looms as curses intend to perpetuate the polarity in which male equals courageous warrior and woman equals feeble. The Delilah versus Samson story—like the David versus Goliath, Ehud versus Eglon, Shamgar versus the Philistines, Jael versus Siserah, Judith versus Holofernes, and other stories—works on the premise of the unlikely quality of the winner to undertake such a battle and therefore their weapons are unconventional. Exactly what is Delilah's weapon is harder to determine: her persistence? Samson's love for her? the razor? There does not seem to be one clear instrument, unconventional or not, as those used by Ehud, Shamgar, Jael, David, or Judith. Perhaps Lori Lefkovitz has the clue to this apparent lack: "In the Hebrew Bible, the bedroom is the battlefield where men always lose."[92]

Delilah is no worse than other people in Judges. Already in 1:23-26 Luz was given away by one of its inhabitants; the principals of Succoth were

90. Aubrey Baadsgaard, "A Taste of Women's Sociality: Cooking as Cooperative Labor in Iron Age Syro-Palestine," in *The World of Women in the Ancient and Classical Near East*, ed. Beth Alpert Nakhai (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 13–44.

91. Mobley, *Samson*, 9.

92. Lori Hope Lefkovitz, *In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 129.

identified by their own and thus killed (8:13-15); and Judah itself had bound and given Samson away, as we have seen earlier. The difference is that Delilah is a woman, and she is said to act out for monetary gain. Relating sex to money creates an ideological connection to the harlot of Gaza. While in chapter 15 the actions of seeing a woman, wanting her, seeking a sexual liaison with her, and being given over by her are all ascribed to one nameless Philistine, in chapter 16 they are split between the nameless prostituted woman living at Gaza and the beloved Delilah. The message is that those women are not far from each other. The Samson story uses several means to keep women under male control, as J. Cheryl Exum and other scholars have warned us. The first tactic used is physical harm (as threat or realized), as manifested in the Timnite's fate; the second one is persuasion by reward, as ascribed to Delilah; and a third way is by classifying people into "our own" or "foreigner/other" by use of binary categories such as male-female, Israelite-foreigner, "respectable women and disreputable women, and thus, . . . making gender solidarity impossible."[93] The patriarchal message is also conveyed through the depiction of a man in love who is unable to resist his beloved's demands. While myriad biblical people are said to marry, very few of them are also said to have loved (אהב) the partner, and in two of those few cases, what is at stake would definitely not be called love today.[94] Mercedes Navarro Puerto has been very perceptive on this issue: "What the [Samson] narrative does not say but the context knows is that [loving a woman] is not a treasured feeling in the culture, but a clear sign of weakness. Or, at any rate, it is a feeling ambivalently perceived because of its effect, . . . emotions that are debilitating to males, setting them in critical situations in relation to women."[95]

93. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 90.

94. The verb אהב is used for a heterosexual erotic relationship in reference to Isaac (Gen 24:67), Jacob (Gen 29:30), Shechem (Gen 34:3), Elkanah (1 Sam 1:5), Michal (1 Sam 18:20, 28), Solomon (1 Kgs 11:1), Amnon (2 Sam 13), Rehoboam (2 Chr 11:21), and Ahasuerus (Esth 2:17). Except for those two stories of Shechem raping Dinah and Amnon raping Tamar, all others involve marriage. See Mercedes L. García Bachmann, "'Love Is Strong as Death' (Song 8:6): Reading the Old Testament in a Context of Gender Violence," in *Congress Volume Stellenbosch 2016*, ed. Louis C. Jonker, Gideon R. Kotzé, and Christl M. Maier, VTSup 177 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 302–28; and in a slightly different version, "Where Love and Death Meet: Reading the Old Testament in a Context of Gender Violence," in *The Five Scrolls*, ed. Athalya Brenner, Gale A. Yee, and Archie C. C. Lee (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 103–20.

95. Mercedes Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio. In-conclusiones en el libro de los Jueces* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2013), 72–73.

The end of Samson and Delilah's story is well known. Delilah cut his hair and Samson woke up to find out that he had lost his strength, because "so too was [cut] the bond and the deity was no longer with him. This functions, to a large extent, as a metaphor of Israel and her deity's relationship."[96] Bragging of their and their god's triumph over Samson (16:23), the Philistines gouged out Samson's eyes, carried him with bronze shackles to a prison, and humiliated him by putting him to work in the lowly occupation of grinding grain. The task was usually performed by slaves, animals, or women (depending on the availability or not of the first two). Besides the real need to have their daily grain, the point here is the intention to humiliate a former warrior-man by feminizing him. Samson's blindness and being in shackles are not gender-determined as are the possibility of being raped, made to grind, and deprived of his hair. Mobley notes that in the Bible there are men "whose hair is a prominent feature and is suggestive of wildness or heroism: Esau, 'the hairy man' (Gen 27:11), Elijah, 'the lord of hair' (2 Kgs 1:8), and Absalom (2 Sam 14:26). In any case, the association between a man's hair and his virility and strength is a common idea."[97] If virility is associated to hairiness, then Samson had started to be deprived of his manhood already by Delilah, not only by the Philistines.

## Samson's Last Heroic Deed (16:21-27)

Imprisoned, humiliated, and oppressed in every way by the Philistines, Samson must have had time to reflect on his life and his mission.[98] What he felt, we cannot know, although we are given a glimpse of it in his last prayer.

96. Schneider, *Judges*, 224. There is some obscurity in the Hebrew text in 16:19: "she let him fall asleep on her lap, and she called the man, and she shaved off the seven locks of his head and she started to humiliate/afflict him." Since "the man" (preposition plus article plus noun as object of "call with loud voice," קרא לאיש) is obscure, most translations interpret that she called a Philistine or a barber; however, the four verbs are feminine and thus the verbs would need emendation. Jack M. Sasson, "Who Cut Samson's Hair (and Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)," *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 333–39, shows that the best explanation is that she called Samson to see whether he was deeply asleep before cutting his locks.

97. Mobley, *Samson*, 10. See also Susan Niditch, *"My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 63–81.

98. If the name Dagon comes from דגן, "grain," there is here an ironic twist to Samson's destruction of the Philistines' grain fields (15:5) and his grinding grain in prison (16:21). See Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 410.

*Judges 16:21-27*

21So the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles; and he ground at the mill in the prison. 22But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

23Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon, and to rejoice; for they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." 24When the people saw him, they praised their god; for they said, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us." 25And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, and let him entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them. They made him stand between the pillars; 26and Samson said to the attendant who held him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them." 27Now the house was full of men and women; all the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about three thousand men and women, who looked on while Samson performed.

Each half of this cycle ends with a prayer by Samson to YHWH, his only recorded cultic acts (except for the Nazirite prohibitions on which, as seen above, there is much discussion): there are no sacrifices, no oracle-seeking, no vows on his own. The most important aspect of this last prayer is that there Samson has to acknowledge his dependence on his God, for life, for strength and vengeance, and for death. Samson had to reach the bottom of his life, blinded, feminized, and restricted, before he was ready to pray to YHWH for a last act against the Philistines and their god.[99] Unfortunately, not even this last act is put in terms of deliverance for Israel or even redress of honor to YHWH but as revenge for his lost sight. By then his hair had grown again and, ironically, the Philistines had not realized his strength came back with it. If virility is associated to hairiness, then Samson had started to recover at least part of it.

## The Wild Man Finally Rests: Home at Last (16:28-30)

Finally, Samson's prayer is answered and he dies with the Philistines, with whom he spent so much of his adult life. The temple falls down, crushing the three thousand onlookers/worshipers and Samson as well.

Charles Halton has shown how the authors give Samson his last laugh against the Philistines by use of homophones and an allomorph. The

99. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 79–80.

*Judges 16:28-30*

28 Then Samson called to the Lord
and said, "Lord God, remember me and
strengthen me only this once, O God,
so that with this one act of revenge I
may pay back the Philistines for my
two eyes." 29 And Samson grasped the
two middle pillars on which the house
rested, and he leaned his weight
against them, his right hand on the one
and his left hand on the other. 30 Then
Samson said, "Let me die with the Phi-
listines." He strained with all his might;
and the house fell on the lords and all
the people who were in it. So those
he killed at his death were more than
those he had killed during his life.

Philistines are gathered in the temple, happy with their performance and attributing their victory not to Delilah but to Dagon. They request that Samson entertain them or play for them (צחק, v. 25). Now, the pun is produced because the same Hebrew grapheme ש is used for two different sounds, /s/ and /sh/. And coincidentally, there are two roots with very different meanings, צחק, "to make sport, entertain," and שחק, "to crush." Thus, the Philistines were inadvertently asking to be crushed, which is about to happen to them. "Furthermore, the pun in Judg 16:25-27 is made all the more apparent by the fact that the author purposely picked the unambiguous allomorph *ṣḥq* instead of *śḥq* in Judg 16:26 when Samson is performing for the crowd. The use of *ṣḥq* between the two occurrences *ś/šḥq* is a cue to the reader/hearer, pointing out the presence of the pun and concomitantly the narrator's point of view."[100] This pun, Samson's last laugh, agrees with his characterization in chapter 14 as a man fond of riddles and proverbs, not a rash fool. It is, moreover, a very common way for underdogs to make fun of the powerful in society.

## Epitaph for Samson (16:31)

Samson's family, of whom we had not heard for a long time, brought him to rest at his father's burial place, where he had been born, somewhere between Zorah and Eshtaol.

This is the last we hear about Samson, except for Hebrews 11:32, where he is recognized as a man of faith.[101] The editors have chosen to close

100. Charles Halton, "Samson's Last Laugh: The Ś/ŠḤq Pun in Judges 16:25-27," *JBL* 128 (2009): 64.

101. According to some proposals for emendation of the MT of 1 Sam 12:11, Samson would be the fourth name, instead of Samuel.

*Judges 16:31*

31 Then his brothers and all his family came down and took him and brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel twenty years.

the series of deliverers with him, so that there is a "sense of disappointment with the judge as leader, despite the numerous miraculous acts he performs."[102] This sense of disappointment will get a new turn as the narrator repeats in the next chapters the general lack of common sense and care for the other: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6; see 18:1; 21:25). No human king, and no divine king either, was there to care for the weakest members of God's people.

102. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 266.

## Judges 17:1–18:31

# *Does "Every Man Did What He Thought Right" Mean Everyone?*

The concluding chapters of the book, chapters 17–21, are called "epilogue," "appendix," "ending," "a collection of unhappy stories,"[1] or "women betrayed."[2] It appears that there were different authors of these various chapters. Seen together, they are very different from the preceding chapters: there are no judges or saving acts; there is only religious, social, and moral chaos, interpreted by the narrator with the refrain "every man did what he thought right."[3] In the course of these stories we will come to the question whether "every man" includes every Israelite, every male, or only some prominent males. I am not disclosing any secret, though, if I say that a reading of chapters 19–21 shows that at least several women could not do what they thought right.

1. Gregory Mobley, *The Empty Men: The Heroic Tradition in Ancient Israel*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 225 (also quoted by Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 419).

2. Danna Nolan Fewell, "Judges," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 74.

3. Note, however, that the NRSV renders איש as "every person," not "every man." In a hierarchical society, not even every man did what he wanted; much less, in a patriarchal society, did every woman have the right or the freedom to do as she pleased. The refrain occurs in 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25.

David Jobling detects six judges (Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson) in whose cycles the pattern of (1) apostasy, (2) foreign oppressor, (3) cry to YHWH, (4) response by sending a judge or deliverer, (5) defeat of oppressor, and (6) faithfulness to YHWH is apparent, considering the remaining text "gaps" between one judge and his/her successor. Here, the most interesting point is that Judges 17–21 is one of those filled gaps.[4] "Judg. 17–21 functions as the gap between Samson and Eli. It was a time of apostasy—though the text does not employ the usual formula of 'going after the Baals and the Ashtaroth', it does stress cultic irregularity within Yahweh-worship. . . . Apostasy leads to distress, which takes the form of internecine strife . . . rather than foreign oppression."[5] An additional element in these chapters is YHWH's almost total silence, except for instructions that Judah would go up first against Benjamin in 20:18. In those days there was no king in Israel, neither human nor divine. The contrast to Israel's first steps into the promised land could not be clearer. At that time they had a divine king and wanted for nothing. Then, there were all those deliverers, who saved them from foreign enemies and from apostasy and brought peace to the land. But now, not even judges can save this broken relationship.

There are two distinct sections with internal subdivisions. Chapters 17–18 deal with a wandering Levite, a shrine owned by a certain Micah and his mother, and the Danites' relocation at the northern border of Israel. Chapters 19–21 tell the story of a Levite's *pîlegeš*-wife leaving her husband and the outrageous actions following her master's retrieval. Although there are common elements between these units, they differ in their theme and their theological approach.

Yairah Amit has demonstrated that the Danites' move (chap. 18) originally closed the book of Judges, coming back to the beginning by "break[ing] the chronological flow,"[6] by returning to the third generation, that of Moses' grandson (18:30), as Aaron's grandson will be mentioned (20:27), and by taking up Dan's restraint by the Amorites and their failure to inherit the land assigned to it (1:34-35). Three stories are interrelated and framed by the refrain "In those days there was no king in Israel":

4. David Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative: Structural Analyses in the Hebrew Bible*, vol. 2 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987 [1986]), 48.

5. Ibid., 49.

6. Yairah Amit, *The Book of the Judges: The Art of Editing*, BibInt 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 312, 316–17.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1) 17:1-5 | Criticism of Micah's shrine and its cultic artifacts, and indirectly criticism of the temple of Dan, in which these artifacts shall be placed. |
| 17:6 | *Judgmental Expression* |
| 2) 17:7-13 | Criticism of those serving in the shrine in the hill country of Ephraim, and thereafter in Dan. |
| 18:1a | *Judgmental Expression* |
| 3) 18:1b-30 | Criticism of the intertribal situation, the destiny of the individual in this period, and the manner of setting up the temple at Dan and its contents.[7] |

Verse 31 works as a seam to link chapters 17–18 and 19–21, introduced later with a focus more on the following books. "Thematically, the episode continues the pattern of topics from the previous story, the Danites, the role of women, and money, and then moves into themes that will explode in the raped *pîlegeš*-wife's story which culminates in Israel's civil war."[8] A sense of continuity is created, both in themes and in disappointment with the governmental (judges), the religious (Levites), and the social (tribal) organization: Who can save Israel from this situation, when even YHWH is silent?

## Every Man Did What He Thought Best—and Some Women Too! (17:1-6)

The story in chapter 17 has been wittily called "Micah and Sons," the story of "a crafty mother who sponsors her son in business as a shrine proprietor, providing the background for the tribe of Dan to acquire a new home."[9] It starts with the formula "Now, there was a man" from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was מיכיהו, "Who is like YHWH?"[10] Mica(yahu) is a son-of-nobody, which is either an indication that he was not Israelite, that his father was unknown, or that his status was

7. Ibid., 346.

8. Tammi Schneider, *Judges: A Commentary*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 229–30.

9. Roger Ryan, *Judges*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 130.

10. Schneider, *Judges*, 230, indicates the continuation of this story to the previous one by the use of the *wayyiqtol* (quoting Marvin A. Sweeney, "The Davidic Polemics in the Book of Judges," *VT* 47 [1997]: 517–29).

*Judges 17:1-6*

17:1There was a man in the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah. 2He said to his mother, "The eleven hundred pieces of silver that were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and even spoke it in my hearing,—that silver is in my possession; I took it; but now I will return it to you." And his mother said, "May my son be blessed by the LORD!" 3Then he returned the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother; and his mother said, "I consecrate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, to make an idol of cast metal." 4So when he returned the money to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver, and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into an idol of cast metal; and it was in the house of Micah. 5This man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and teraphim, and installed one of his sons, who became his priest. 6In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

not high enough for the authors to record his patrilineage. As noted by Tammi Schneider, however, "This would be the first case in Judges where a main male character did not have a named father, even if his mother was a prostitute."[11] Since Manoah had already been introduced as from the family, not the tribe, of Dan, would it not be possible to take Micah's "orphanhood" as a device by the authors to further diminish this man? In this way, Micayahu is every Israelite; since "YHWH" soon disappears from his name (Micah), he is every Israelite who turns away from YHWH.

Micah's mother is his only dialogue partner in this scene. She is anonymous and is not young anymore, since she has a grandson old enough to be installed by Micah as priest. She appears only in this short scene and always as "his mother," always in reference to him, even though she takes half the initiatives and actually the whole scene is possible because of her earlier oath concerning whoever stole her silver. She may be nameless, perhaps widowed, but she is not helpless. "She is not like the mother of Samson, carefully keeping religious tradition for the sake of her son, nor a 'mother in Israel' making judicious decisions and leading her people in liberation."[12] She has enough financial means to be able to dedicate a large sum, eleven hundred shekels of silver. Given that this amount is the same amount offered and paid by each Philistine

11. Schneider, *Judges*, 232.
12. Fewell, "Judges," 74.

lord to Delilah (and given a few more possible coincidences), scholars from rabbinical times on have wondered whether this woman could have been Delilah. Micah is not, however, said to be "from the family/tribe of Dan," which would have made a stronger argument for this possibility. Moreover, identifying this woman openly with Delilah would have cast her as wicked, something the authors do not do.

After introducing Micah, there is a dialogue by which we learn that he had stolen eleven hundred shekels of silver from his mother. Not knowing who was the thief, she has sworn an oath against him and now he returns the silver in order to cancel the curse against him. Despite Micah's betrayal, there is no rebuke from her, only a blessing. Carolyn Pressler thinks that this "may be an expression of a doting parent's affectionate response to a confession. More likely, the blessing is an attempt to avert the curse that she had unwittingly evoked against her own child. Her dedication of the silver to Yahweh is probably a further effort to ward off the effects of the curse."[13] It is unclear who takes the silver and what happens to the remaining pieces, since only a portion went to the molten image ordered by her.[14] At any rate, whether kept or dedicated, it is dirty money, the produce of a theft now dedicated to a forbidden image (פסל and מסכה, v. 3).[15]

I would be hard pressed to decide which was worse, Micah's theft or his mother's dedication of the silver for images, for they are forbidden cultic elements. Isaiah is particularly poignant when he described the idols as human creations (Isa 2:18-20; 45:16-20). Israel came out of Egypt, accepted God's law at Sinai, reconfirmed their covenant under Joshua's leadership, and entered the land as a people with a God different from other gods, a God unlike any other deity—מיכיהו. Now, "after

13. Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 229.

14. Most translations take the verb as if indicating an act at the time of her blessing: "I herewith dedicate" or "I verily dedicate," הקדש הקדשתי. The verb is a perfect, however, and thus could very well be translated "I had dedicated." The main difference would be in detecting her intention as a counter-curse or as a pious, although wrong, religious act. Likewise, the text is unclear on how many times the money changes hands. E. Aydeet Mueller, *The Micah Story: A Morality Tale in the Book of Judges*, StBibLit 34 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 55, rightly points out that this exchange may be a device to indicate Micah's and his mother's fear at the curse.

15. Apart from Judg 17:3-4, this exact expression appears only in Deut 27:15 and Nah 1:14. Together or not, they have negative connotations, see, for example, Exod 20:4; 32:4, 8.

this disgraceful act, he can no longer be called Micayahu (*mî-kā-yĕhû* = Who is like Yhwh?, 17.1, 4), but rather only Micah (17.5–18.31)."[16] Would Micah have concurred or did he see himself as Yahwist? Since all mentions of YHWH are put in his or his mother's lips (not the narrator's), I would suppose he thought his shrine was in YHWH's honor. As to the objects made, *teraphim* and *ephod* have in some texts a positive slant. *Teraphim* were images of deceased ancestors, which provided oracles through necromancy (see Gen 31:19-35; Ezek 21:26).[17] The *ephod* was a garment worn by the priest, as seen in Exodus 28 and other texts. Thus, one may detect in this action disregard for the local shrines at Shiloh and Bethel (see 18:31; 21:19; and 20:26-28).[18] Making an *ephod* for one's own shrine is "a snare for all Israel," as already stated by the narrator when Gideon made one (Judg 8:27). Gideon's ephod and the references in Judges 17–18 are the only occurrences of these four terms in Judges, which seems not to be by chance.[19]

Rather than seeing a mother leading her son into idolatry, Heidi Szpek attributes responsibility equally to both and also wonders what kind of a father Micah was, as he "willingly accepts the introduction of idolatry. He is no more coerced into idolatry than Adam was coerced to eat of the fruit of the tree by Woman."[20] Micah is already a *paterfamilias*, a grown-up, so his mother cannot be held responsible for his idolatrous action. Benjamin Cox and Susan Ackerman have found an ingenious solution to some interpretive dilemmas in this chapter. Starting from other biblical texts in which the *teraphim* are deceased ancestors sought by necromancy, they show that at least three elements in the story make

16. Uwe F. W. Bauer, "Judges 18 as an Anti-Spy Story in the Context of an Anti-Conquest Story: The Creative Usage of Literary Genres," *JSOT* 88 (2000): 39 n. 9.

17. Following Benjamin D. Cox and Susan Ackerman, "Micah's Teraphim," *JHS* 12, no. 11 (2012): 4–5, www.jhsonline.org/Articles/article_173.pdf. Most scholars retain the traditional understanding of images of local, family patronizing deities.

18. Ryan, *Judges*, 133, "where Phinehas is priest-in-residence with the ark of the covenant (20.26-28)."

19. Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative*, 52–53, affirms that "the two sections which . . . offer explicit reflection on the 'gaps' in the judge-cycles, Judge.[*sic*] 8.33–9.57 and chs. 17–21, are exactly the two places where kingship, an intrinsically *continuous* form of government, is put forward as an alternative to judgeship."

20. Heidi M. Szpek, "'Do Not Reject Your Mother's Teaching?!'—The Function of Micah's Mother in Judges 17," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 2 (2007), 4, http://wjudaism.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wjudaism/article/view/3074/1224. One of Szpek's arguments in this paper is Micah's resemblance with Adam, Solomon, and other men whose women turned them aside from YHWH.

more sense when Micah's *teraphim* are understood as an image of his recently deceased father. One such element is his appropriation of his widowed mother's silver, which had previously belonged to his father; second, his preoccupation only with the *teraphim* as the Danites steal it (18:15-26); and third, his appointment of his son and then of the Levite as priests for his family shrine in his stead.[21]

Notice should be taken also of the ambiguous use of "house" in these verses. The ambiguity seems to have the purpose of pointing out Micah's and his mother's wrong attitude: his house = his family and his house = his shrine are treated in the same way. Micah steals from his mother, gives it back, makes images, furnishes his shrine with *teraphim*, appoints one priest, then gets a better one, and replaces the son-priest for the Levite-priest. It seems as if everything and everybody were his property and could be dealt with as he deemed best. Szpek points out that no other "mother-child relationship depicts such outright disrespect of child for parent or parent for child."[22] Actually, Micah's mother acts the same way when she changes a curse into a blessing by the use of a jussive (a verbal form indicating a wish) while not *asking* YHWH to reconsider the earlier oath. The basic problem with this family is that they treat their deity (Elohim/the gods/YHWH) as if also subjected to their own will. Like mother, like son—like grandson? We will not know, for we are introduced to Micah's son only as the object of Micah's consecration as priest (v. 5), soon to disappear from the scene.

Before proceeding further, we may pause and take up the question of the phrase "every man did what he thought right." This assessment appeared already in verse 6 and will be repeated in 21:25. The reason for bringing it up now and not at the end of the book is the way it is related to Micah's mother's actions. Barry Webb wonders whether we are to take אישׁ as indicating "every male," "every person," "every powerful person," or in some other way and opts for "man" in the sense of human being, "because of the prominent role Micah's *mother* plays in the story."[23] This question has no easy solution, and it should be seen in each particular story, especially as it pertains to women, slaves, foreigners, children, and other unprotected people. In the verses just studied, it is fair to say that Micah and his unidentified mother did what they wanted and even

21. Cox and Ackerman, "Micah's Teraphim," 11–14, 24–28. Although these scholars emphasize that their proposals are speculative, I find them probable.

22. Szpek, "'Do Not Reject Your Mother's Teaching?!,'" 4.

23. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 426 n. 28. Emphasis in the original.

thought their actions were backed up by YHWH. The story will soon contradict them, however, showing that, in the end, every man and some women did what was right in their own eyes only until some other man/men had more power to impose what *they* thought right. Then as now it is unwise to generalize, since people's potential to do what they thought right was (and is) restricted by several factors, such as financial independence, marital status, ethnic background, family ties, education, gender relations, and other factors. It may be safe to state that women were and still are more restricted than men of their same social and ethnic categories, that is, given equal benefits in one or more of these factors (such as ethnic background, age, or family ties), women suffered, and still do suffer, gender injustice. That Micah's mother may have decided what to do with her silver does not mean that her female slave(s) would have had the same right or that she would have even had that same chance had she been a married mother.

## Of a Levite Who Is a Father, a Son, and . . . More (17:7-13)

The second scene opens with an anonymous Levite leaving his land of Judah in search of a job, who happened to come to Micah's house. He is characterized as a נער, which indicates a person not yet established as a *paterfamilias*. He seems to travel alone; unlike the unnamed Levite we will meet in chapter 19, there is no mention of women. The remaining information about him is confusing: Is he from the tribe of Judah or Levi? Had he been serving as a priest in Judah until he decided he would seek a better job offer? We do not know and perhaps that is the authors' goal. His "hazy background," reasons E. Aydeet Mueller, "matches the hazy motives of the Levite's search for a position as a priest."[24]

With no hesitation, Micah offers him an allowance, lodging, and board, which the Levite accepts. He summarizes the relationship as one in which the Levite becomes "a father and a priest" to him (v. 10a). I take these words to be ironic, although perhaps from the narrator and not Micah himself. For Micah is the one to provide the Levite (who has been unable to become a *paterfamilias* so far and is a נער) his means of sustenance, and thus, as the narrator further corroborates in the following verse, he will treat the Levite as one of his sons. Webb wonders:

> What happened to this son? Was he replaced, or demoted, or has he simply gone missing, like the nine hundred pieces of silver that went

24. Mueller, *The Micah Story*, 62.

*Judges 17:7-13*

7Now there was a young man of
Bethlehem in Judah, of the clan of
Judah. He was a Levite residing there.
8This man left the town of Bethlehem in
Judah, to live wherever he could find a
place. He came to the house of Micah
in the hill country of Ephraim to carry
on his work. 9Micah said to him, "From
where do you come?" He replied, "I
am a Levite of Bethlehem in Judah,
and I am going to live wherever I can
find a place." 10Then Micah said to him,
"Stay with me, and be to me a father
and a priest, and I will give you ten
pieces of silver a year, a set of clothes,
and your living." 11The Levite agreed to
stay with the man; and the young man
became to him like one of his sons.
12So Micah installed the Levite, and the
young man became his priest, and was
in the house of Micah. 13Then Micah
said, "Now I know that the LORD will
prosper me, because the Levite has
become my priest."

> missing in verses 1-4? No one seems to know or care; least of all Micah and his new employee, who settle at once into a cozy "father/son" relationship. In religious matters it is the Levite who is *father* to Micah (v. 10), while in domestic affairs (by implication) it is Micah who is father to the Levite (v. 11).[25]

Webb takes both relationships as possible, so that each one is a "father" to the other in a different area. While theoretically possible, such an arrangement creates a highly volatile relationship and, considering what we know of Micah's dealings with his mother and his son, not a very safe one for the Levite. Perhaps, realizing this, he took up the next available post.

At any rate, it is clear that Micah is searching for a priest who would ensure YHWH's favor for him. Micah and his family are representatives of a generation's disregard for their deity. In that sense, "Micah's story is ironic and perhaps in some ways pathetic. In order to gain divine approval, the penitent thief fashions an idol from stolen and accursed silver. He assumes that his idol and his Levitical priest will guarantee his well-being, an assumption that proves to be utterly wrong. Micah is looking for God in all the wrong places. Such is the chaos into which the tribes' religion had fallen."[26] That chaos will manifest itself in yet worse actions, one of which is the Levite becoming not only Micah's father and son but also his defector and thief.

25. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 428.
26. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 231.

## Six Hundred (Male) Danites Search for Their Own Inheritance (18:1-31)

Chapter 18 takes up two previous themes: Samson's tribe Dan and Micah's house. The chapter may be taken as one scene or subdivided into several smaller units. It is a parody of the story of the conquest of Jericho in Joshua 2 and 6. Its satiric character lies in the way each of the movements is carried out and in the overall picture of Danites as thieves and murderers—or at least as cheap warriors—with a spurious sanctuary.

### *The Danites Start Their Search for Land*

The narrator is clear that the enterprise of getting an inheritance was the Danites' idea, not YHWH's.[27] It is a contradiction, since an inheritance (נחלה) is received, inherited (passive acts), not a possession to be sought; it is to be actualized after being given by God (see the criticism of the Danites' failure to take their inheritance in 1:34). With no previous searching for the divine will, they send five warriors to spy "the land" with no further specification (two had gone to Jericho, sent by Joshua).[28] Susan Niditch asserts that

> this tale is characterized by an aggressive, conqueror's demeanor that might be called hegemonist. Israelites, desirous of land, defeat an admittedly innocent group and take their land simply because they want it and they are able to do so. The ideology of expediency . . . operates as one is made to see the workings of realpolitik in the ancient world. In chs. 17–18, as in the vignettes in ch. 1 and the tale of civil war in chs. 19–21, themes concerning the transience of power are especially strong. . . . No covenantal ideology frames the acts of violence, justifying who wins and who loses or why, and the role of the deity, arbiter of war, while always implicit might be seen as muted. It is in this context that we read, "In those days there was no king . . . ," a phrase or rubric that appears first in 17:6 and, in part or in whole, three more times in chs. 17–21. This line is not, as some have suggested, an indictment of

27. In addition to these words by the narrator, Bauer ("Judges 18 as an Anti-Spy Story," esp. 37–42) shows how different elements of the literary genre of the spy story (which is in turn a form of the YHWH-war story) have been selected for inverted use or avoided in order to throw a doubtful aura over the Danites' conquest.

28. Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger, *Stadt und Eidgenossenschaft im Alten Testament*, BZAW 156 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1983), 317, speaks of "courageous men and soldiers."

*Judges 18:1-31*

18:1In those days there was no king
in Israel. And in those days the tribe
of the Danites was seeking for itself
a territory to live in; for until then no
territory among the tribes of Israel had
been allotted to them. 2So the Danites
sent five valiant men from the whole
number of their clan, from Zorah and
from Eshtaol, to spy out the land and
to explore it; and they said to them,
"Go, explore the land." When they
came to the hill country of Ephraim, to
the house of Micah, they stayed there.
3While they were at Micah's house,
they recognized the voice of the young
Levite; so they went over and asked
him, "Who brought you here? What
are you doing in this place? What is
your business here?" 4He said to them,
"Micah did such and such for me, and
he hired me, and I have become his
priest." 5Then they said to him, "Inquire
of God that we may know whether
the mission we are undertaking will
succeed." 6The priest replied, "Go in
peace. The mission you are on is under
the eye of the Lord."
7The five men went on, and when
they came to Laish, they observed the
people who were there living securely,
after the manner of the Sidonians,
quiet and unsuspecting, lacking noth-
ing on earth, and possessing wealth.
Furthermore, they were far from the
Sidonians and had no dealings with
Aram. 8When they came to their kins-
folk at Zorah and Eshtaol, they said
to them, "What do you report?" 9They
said, "Come, let us go up against them;
for we have seen the land, and it is
very good. Will you do nothing? Do not
be slow to go, but enter in and possess
the land. 10When you go, you will come
to an unsuspecting people. The land is

early times of chaos, but an accepting commentary on a romantic, battle-ridden, foundation period in the history of the nation.[29]

When the five men came to Micah's house in Ephraim they recognized the Levite's voice.[30] They ask, as an afterthought, for an oracle from YHWH as to whether they will succeed in seeking an inheritance. The Levite assures them (no record of his seeking YHWH is given to us, but we may assume he did consult the *teraphim* or *ephod*): "Go in peace [לשלום]. In front of/opposite to/over against נכח YHWH is your path, wherein you go" (v. 6, author's translation). His answer is taken to mean that they will be blessed in their mission of war (see, e.g., NRSV). The

29. Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 180.

30. As supposed by Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, *Erzälte Welten im Richterbuch*, BibInt 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 190.

*Judges 18:1-31 (cont.)*

broad—God has indeed given it into your hands—a place where there is no lack of anything on earth."

11Six hundred men of the Danite clan, armed with weapons of war, set out from Zorah and Eshtaol, 12and went up and encamped at Kiriath-jearim in Judah. On this account that place is called Mahaneh-dan to this day; it is west of Kiriath-jearim. 13From there they passed on to the hill country of Ephraim, and came to the house of Micah.

14Then the five men who had gone to spy out the land (that is, Laish) said to their comrades, "Do you know that in these buildings there are an ephod, teraphim, and an idol of cast metal? Now therefore consider what you will do." 15So they turned in that direction and came to the house of the young Levite, at the home of Micah, and greeted him. 16While the six hundred men of the Danites, armed with their weapons of war, stood by the entrance of the gate, 17the five men who had gone to spy out the land proceeded to enter and take the idol of cast metal, the ephod, and the teraphim. The priest was standing by the entrance of the gate with the six hundred men armed with weapons of war. 18When the men went into Micah's house and took the idol of cast metal, the ephod, and the teraphim, the priest said to them, "What are you doing?" 19They said to him, "Keep quiet! Put your hand over your mouth, and come with us, and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one person, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?" 20Then the priest accepted the offer. He took the ephod, the teraphim, and the idol, and went along with the people.

21So they resumed their journey, putting the little ones, the livestock,

Levite's answer is, however, strikingly ambiguous. First, שלום is used to ask about someone's welfare (see Judg 18:15, the only other use of the expression in this book), yet it is taken to indicate "proceed to war." One could grant that they are not going as warriors but as spies, but that would not solve our quandary. Second, the preposition נכח may be translated with several English words.[31] Oracles are usually obscure, and this Levite is a master at speaking without committing himself. "True to his character as a priest-for-hire, the Levite tells the Danites what they want to hear."[32]

31. For instance, the conversation between the Levite and his assistant sojourning back home in 19:10 happens as they stood עד נכח, "over against, opposite," Jebus. And in Prov 5:21, נכח is translated "under (the eyes)" by NRSV and "before (the eyes)" by the Jewish Publication Society translation.

32. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 433.

and the goods in front of them. [22]When they were some distance from the home of Micah, the men who were in the houses near Micah's house were called out, and they overtook the Danites. [23]They shouted to the Danites, who turned around and said to Micah, "What is the matter that you come with such a company?" [24]He replied, "You take my gods that I made, and the priest, and go away, and what have I left? How then can you ask me, 'What is the matter?'" [25]And the Danites said to him, "You had better not let your voice be heard among us or else hot-tempered fellows will attack you, and you will lose your life and the lives of your household." [26]Then the Danites went their way. When Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back to his home.

[27]The Danites, having taken what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, put them to the sword, and burned down the city. [28]There was no deliverer, because it was far from Sidon and they had no dealings with Aram. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth-rehob. They rebuilt the city, and lived in it. [29]They named the city Dan, after their ancestor Dan, who was born to Israel; but the name of the city was formerly Laish. [30]Then the Danites set up the idol for themselves. Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the time the land went into captivity. [31]So they maintained as their own Micah's idol that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.

### *A Short Digression on the Levite's Character*

Let us briefly review the Levite's character. What was just said concurs with his overall depiction as someone who is easily manipulated (hired, rehired, taken along) and hardly responsible for his own actions, even though, as a priest, he is responsible not only for his actions but for his role as divine messenger. Noticeably, in 17:7-13 and 18:3-6 he only answers (to Micah or to the spies), never taking the initiative. In his last appearance (18:18-20) he questions the Danites' plundering of Micah's property but is quickly silenced, and, the text tells us, he is delighted to accept a new post with the tribe rather than with one family. So, he leaves Micah, carrying the worship objects with him (18:20). Considering the six hundred hot-tempered warriors standing at the gate of Micah's house, fear was a factor, of course. This is an example that not all men—much less women—did what they thought right. General estrangement from YHWH, by the Danites, the Levite, and Micah's family, is another issue to be considered; estrangement made manifest in trying to control

rather than listen to YHWH and in the general lack of regard for other peoples' lives and possessions.[33] If someone does not respect his or her own deity, much less will they respect other peoples' lives. This power imbalance worsens as those who plunder or threaten other people are also in control of gunfire; here it is the six hundred Danites, but history is full of stories of powerful people supporting their illegal claims and whims with guns and bullying.

### *The Danites' Despoliation Continues*

After hearing the report from the spies, the Danite men form a six-hundred-warrior army and go north, coming by Micah's house once more. Their number "recalls the six hundred thousand Hebrew men that according to tradition (Exod. 12:37) set out from Egypt toward the promised land" and also the six hundred remaining Benjaminites after the intertribal war in 20–21.[34]

Judges 18:21 mentions for the first time children, cattle, and household goods, apparently taken by the Danites in their migration and located now at the forefront to protect them from a possible attack from the rear by Micah and his household. Their low moral quality is indicated in the spies' suggestion that there are ritual objects to be stolen from the man who housed them on their way north and from his priest (vv. 14-20). Whether the attraction is the silver value or the ritual value of objects that would ensure their victory over those to be conquered is unclear.

After their departure, Micah assembles a group of men, pursues them, and confronts them with their theft. The Danites' answer is arrogant and violent: if you want to stay alive, turn back and shut up (vv. 22-26). Micah, defeated and despoiled of his (man-made) gods and of his priest, does so. "Like Micah, who covets and takes what he may have received from his mother some day (Judg 17:2), the Danites appear incapable of differentiating between coveting, stealing, and inheriting land given by YHWH (18:9-10)."[35] The Danites' despoliation continues against the in-

33. Mueller, *The Micah Story*, 69, attributes his actions to fear. Cf. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 433; Yee, "Ideological Criticism," in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 149–52.

34. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 234. Robin Baker (*Hollow Men, Strange Women: Riddles, Codes, and Otherness in the Book of Judges*, BibInt 143 [Leiden: Brill, 2016], 217) detects in the number allusions to the six hundred Mesopotamian Annunaki gods of the Underworld.

35. Mueller, *The Micah Story*, 67.

habitants of Laish, depicted by the narrator in extremely positive terms, especially considering that they are not Israelites: they are peaceful, unsuspecting, isolated, and, thus, unable to ask for help when attacked (vv. 27-29). John Yoder realizes that the story is "a striking testimonial to the value of knowledge dispensed at Micah's shrine, ended happily for the Danites."[36]

Not only is this an anti-conquest story, but it is also a carnivalesque reversal of all treasured values: Danites are treacherous while Canaanites are peaceful;[37] the Danites are bullies and thieves toward their own countrymen.

It is hard not to look beyond the literary world of Judges and immediately jump to the divided monarchy, in which the popularity of Dan's sanctuary needed to be countered by such bizarre stories. Keeping within Judges, one may fall prey to the temptation of ridiculing the Danites for their actions, especially after hearing of Samson's adventures, the only judge from Dan. Or one may want to blame the Levite, who is now surprisingly identified as a direct descendant of Moses, no less (v. 30).[38]

> The rubric ["In those days there was no king"] also frames, in a neutral way, various forms of religious activity that would be considered highly irregular by Deuteronomic-style writers: the ad hoc priesthood whose founder begins his career as a retainer for a wealthy chieftain; the peculiar way in which various iconic objects are funded and created; and the very use of paraphernalia such as an ephod, condemned in the tale of Gideon by the voice of the theologian but here associated, at least in some manuscript traditions, with the genealogy of Gershom, son of Moses.[39]

A careful look at the whole picture of Judges up to this point shows that there is no longer any righteous man or woman—and if there was one, he or she would have been so lonely that it would have been impossible to make a difference in such a troubled, godless society. Not even YHWH tried to make a difference any longer—or to say anything, for that matter. Unfortunately, there are yet worse stories to be recounted.

36. John C. Yoder, *Power and Politics in the Book of Judges* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 74.

37. Schneider, *Judges*, 240, notes the inhabitants of Laish are never identified ethnically, except for the reference to the Sidonians, which is obscure.

38. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 334–35.

39. Niditch, *Judges*, 180.

# Judges 19:1–21:25

## *The Apotheosis of Gendered Violence*

Judges 19–21 has four episodes: the outrage at Gibeah, the call to war against Gibeah, the war against Benjamin, and the postwar period. It all started with a trip from Ephraim to Judah, undertaken by a woman, a Levite's *pîlegeš*–wife.[1] This is followed by another trip by her deserted husband-master to fetch her. On their trip back to Ephraim, a stop-over at Gibeah results in the city's men abusing the Levite's honor by gang-raping this *pîlegeš*-wife (19:1-28). Back home, the Levite manages to start a war against the Gibeahites by sending her limbs to each tribe (19:29–20:11).[2] Since the Gibeahites' tribe, Benjamin, refuses to hand the rapists over, all Israel goes to war against Benjamin (20:12-48). In the end, they realize one of their tribes, Benjamin, will be lost and take measures to ensure their continuity (Judg 21). One might speak of a final journey,

1. For the meaning of *pîlegeš*, see above, n. 25 in the commentary on Judg 6–9.

2. Susan Niditch, "The 'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19–20: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 366, notes "three essential parts or moves [in Judges 19–20], each begun with a journey." Mitzi Smith, "Reading the Story of the Levite's Concubine Through the Lens of Modern-Day Sex Trafficking," *ATJ* 41 (2009): 17–30, speaks of five journeys, starting from the woman's journey to join the Levite's household.

one with no return, of the *pîlegeš*-wife's limbs unto the whole land of Israel, there to be lost without proper burial place.

The crime of the Gibeahites in chapter 19 is instrumental for understanding not only the next two chapters but also the whole book of Judges. These three chapters should also be seen together with the first chapters of the books of Samuel. Samuel is the last judge of Israel, under whose rule many of the tensions noted in Judges will explode: the question of charismatic or hereditary leadership, priestly corruption, the increasing gap between a rich elite and the peasantry, and the switch to monarchy. A careful scrutiny shows differences between chapters 17–18 and 19–21 while also sharing common motifs.[3] At the same time, Judges 19–21 also takes up motifs from chapter 1, such as Achsah's and the unnamed *pîlegeš*-wife's long trip (one well and alive, the other dying or dead, on a donkey) to get to her father's home and back to her husband's, and both women were Judahites. There is a triangular relationship for each of these women (and, to a lesser degree, in the abduction of the girls from Shiloh) with the father and husband. Furthermore, Judah appears only in the book's beginning and end.[4]

Although women are many and pivotal in these last stories, they have no voice and receive little respect. They are an excuse for some of the patriarchal favorite male entertainments: going after women (the Levite, the Gibeahites, the Benjaminites), bonding through drinking (the Levite, his father-in-law), bringing a lower-rank person into submission through brutal sex (the Ephraimite's and the Levite's offering of their women to the Gibeahites, and the *pîlegeš*-wife's gang rape), and warring (involving everyone except Levites). On the other hand, typically female activities, such as telling stories, cooking, or festive dancing, are totally disregarded here or—worse—they are used to serve male interests, such as male hospitality and sex.

3. Yairah Amit, *The Book of the Judges: The Art of Editing*, BibInt 38 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 337–57, shows that chapters 19–21 were added to the original ending of the book in order to cast a negative light on Benjamin; see also Danna Nolan Fewell, *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 197–223.

4. Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges: A Commentary*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 249–51; Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 244; see also Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 244–49; E. T. A. Davidson, *Intricacy, Design, and Cunning in the Book of Judges* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2008), 62–64; Deryn Guest, "Judges," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, and Mona West (London: SCM, 2006), 187.

A central issue for us in these chapters is rape and its use to humiliate a man and to keep women under control. Alice Bach writes, "Rape is not so much a sexual crime as it is a means of physical, mental, and spiritual domination."[5] There is an undercurrent (resisted by feminists and other thinkers) that teaches: had the woman not left her husband-master, the whole episode would not have happened. "The live concubine who once left her master has become the dead object of his appalling violence. Her movement away from him now is actually his call for revenge."[6] Her being given to many men to be raped is a punishment for her not being available to her master, states J. Cheryl Exum.[7] The issue is a complex one, for—as we will discuss later—hospitality is one sign by which to measure a society's treatment of its weakest members and it should have been honored, no matter which woman had left for what reasons. Thus, the narrator adresses two issues at once: the fate of women who leave their husband-masters and the vulnerability of a society far from its God and careless of its weakest members.

To what degree the narrator is complicit in these wrongdoings by, at least, protecting the Levite as much as possible (for instance, by never identifying the actual perpetrator of the woman's murder) is a matter of interpretation; interpretation made all the more difficult by cultural assumptions on what irony or rape mean, for example.[8] The narrator has done such a good job that it is easy to understand if not to feel empathy with every character of the story, for they are all flawed in their behaviors—to say nothing of their motivations. And being anonymous, they

5. Alice Bach, "Rereading the Body Politic: Women and Violence in Judges 21," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 143.

6. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 80.

7. J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives*, JSOTSup 163 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 179–80.

8. In *Texts of Terror*, Trible laid bare the text's violence against this woman, including being ignored by the rest of the Bible, the apostolic fathers, and later scholarship (65–91). Her work was groundbreaking and, perhaps because of that, extreme in its critique; later scholars have contributed a more nuanced reading of the story, especially the narrator's stand on it and other power dynamics besides gender. See Koala Jones-Warsaw, "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic: A Reading of Judges 19–21," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 179–86; Jan Fokkelman, "Structural Remarks on Judges 9 and 19," in *Sha'arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 40–41.

may be anyone: a religious officer who is a stranger in his own land (and whose office has been already cast in a dark light in chaps. 17 and 18), who is almost raped and suffers the violation of his wife (yes, he himself has put them in that situation!); a wife who commits a socially reprehensible act of deserting her husband and is made to come back to him; a host whose right to host is questioned because he himself is foreign to the city; a host who is ready to hand over his own daughter and a female guest to the mob in order to protect the religious representative staying with him; and a tribe ready to go to war in order to protect its own worthless men.[9] Since the social fabric is so destroyed that every man did what was right in his view, is this story a way of teaching men—especially leaders—not to do the right thing in their own eyes? Is this story a way of teaching women—especially bound or second-rank women—not to do the right thing in *their* own eyes? Questions are legion. I will select some, but the reader will remain hungry for answers. I will first address each chapter's main issues, leaving the question about YHWH's participation in the story to the end.

## Violence against the Levite—Told by the Narrator (19:1-30)

In a time when there was no king over Israel, a man, a Levite living in Ephraim, "took for himself a woman *pîlegeš*-wife [or a woman, a *pîlegeš*-wife] from Beth-lehem of Judah" (v. 1).[10] The term *pîlegeš* was used of Abimelech's mother (8:31). We saw then that she did belong to an influential family, who could convince the lords of Shechem to support Abimelech as king, but still that did not deter his brothers from expelling him from Gideon's household. We will pause later to reflect on family dynamics in this story.

9. Ilse Müllner, "Lethal Differences: Sexual Violence as Violence against Others in Judges 19," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (1999), 137–39. John C. Yoder, *Power and Politics in the Book of Judges: Men and Women of Valor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 152, looks at issues of power (by administering honor, among other goods) among big men and concludes that the Benjaminites were put in a lose-lose situation, because they could not have honorably given up their own kin.

10. Patricia Beth MacKenzie, "The Vine of Sodom: A Literary Analysis of Judges 19–21" (MA thesis, University of Alberta, 2001), 23–24, notes that the refrain "there was no king in Israel" indicates the absence of both human and divine kings (see Gideon's affirmation in Judg 8:23), thus calling attention to the social disruption produced by a society that no longer seeks its deity's guidance.

*Judges 19:1-30*

19:1In those days, when there was
no king in Israel, a certain Levite, re-
siding in the remote parts of the hill
country of Ephraim, took to himself a
concubine from Bethlehem in Judah.
2But his concubine became angry
with him, and she went away from
him to her father's house at Bethle-
hem in Judah, and was there some
four months. 3Then her husband set
out after her, to speak tenderly to her
and bring her back. He had with him
his servant and a couple of donkeys.
When he reached her father's house,
the girl's father saw him and came with
joy to meet him. 4His father-in-law, the
girl's father, made him stay, and he re-
mained with him three days; so they
ate and drank, and he stayed there.
5On the fourth day they got up early in
the morning, and he prepared to go;
but the girl's father said to his son-in-
law, "Fortify yourself with a bit of food,
and after that you may go." 6So the two
men sat and ate and drank together;
and the girl's father said to the man,
"Why not spend the night and enjoy
yourself?" 7When the man got up to go,
his father-in-law kept urging him until
he spent the night there again. 8On the
fifth day he got up early in the morn-
ing to leave; and the girl's father said,
"Fortify yourself." So they lingered until
the day declined, and the two of them
ate and drank. 9When the man with his
concubine and his servant got up to
leave, his father-in-law, the girl's father,
said to him, "Look, the day has worn
on until it is almost evening. Spend
the night. See, the day has drawn to a
close. Spend the night here and enjoy
yourself. Tomorrow you can get up
early in the morning for your journey,
and go home."

The text is variously named "the outrage of Gibeah,"[11] "the concubine in Gibeah,"[12] "consider, take counsel, and speak,"[13] "asesinato machista,"[14] and even "the story that never was."[15] Although one might speak directly of rape, so that the crime is not lost in euphemisms, I have chosen a more general descriptor for this story. From the text's perspective, the whole episode is one of violence against the master, performed through abuse rather than hospitality, and violence to his property—violence and humiliation that, in turn, produce a war of monumental

11. Barry Webb, *The Book of Judges*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 454.

12. Amit, *The Book of the Judges*, 337.

13. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 239.

14. Mercedes Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio. In-conclusiones en el libro de los Jueces* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2013), 76.

15. Heidi M. Szpek, "The Levite's Concubine: The Story That Never Was," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 5 (2007): 1–10.

*Judges 19:1-30 (cont.)*

10But the man would not spend the night; he got up and departed, and arrived opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys, and his concubine was with him. 11When they were near Jebus, the day was far spent, and the servant said to his master, "Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it." 12But his master said to him, "We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah." 13Then he said to his servant, "Come, let us try to reach one of these places, and spend the night at Gibeah or at Ramah." 14So they passed on and went their way; and the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin. 15They turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. He went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night.

16Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was residing in Gibeah. (The people of the place were Benjaminites.) 17When the old man looked up and saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city, he said, "Where are you going and where do you come from?" 18He answered him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah; and I am going to my home. Nobody has offered to take me in. 19We your servants have straw and fodder for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and the woman and the young man along with us. We need nothing more." 20The old man said, "Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square." 21So he brought him into his house, and fed the donkeys; they washed their feet, and ate and drank.

22While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and

proportions and an equally disproportionate number of civil casualties. It is still about gendered violence, for the author has chosen a woman who leaves her husband-master as the site of shame and vengeance. Whether the issue was violence against a representative of the cult or against a sojourner only (to take two examples that would not change the main character of the Levite), several other manifestations of violence could have been used, including the homosexual rape with which the men threaten the Levite at first (the verb ידע, "know," has an ample range of meanings in Hebrew) or plain denial of hospitality at their city. While for the biblical worldview it is about violence to the Levite on his property, for us it involves gender violence as well: Judges 19 is also about

started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him." [23]And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. [24]Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing." [25]But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. [26]As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light.

[27]In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. [28]"Get up," he said to her, "we are going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home. [29]When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. [30]Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.'"

the place a woman must keep in a patriarchal society. At stake are also the different value perceptions of heterosexual and homosexual rape.[16]

### *"A Man, a Levite"*

The very beginning of the chapter, "a man, a Levite," ויהי איש לוי, calls attention to another Levite who took a wife; the difference is that this wife was not a *pîlegeš*-wife: she was Levi's daughter and mother of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (Exod 2:1). The fact that these two texts are unique in the Hebrew Bible in that they combine "man" and "Levi" seems to point to an intended intertextual reference. Is Judges alerting us to a possible

16. James Harding ("Homophobia and Masculine Domination in Judges 19–21," *The Bible & Critical Theory* 12, no. 2 [2016]: 41–74, http://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ojsbct/index.php/bct/index) explores the responsibility of this story (and much of its interpretation) in the creation and perpetuation of homophobia.

hero's birth, to be too soon frustrated? And if so, is this Levite frustrated because the woman does not rise to Jochebed's standards as to tribe, social location, and personal behavior? Interestingly, there is nothing about her fertility: she is neither a mother nor an unhappy childless wife.

## TRANSLATION MATTERS

There are several possibilities for translating the first references to the woman in verse 2. The Massoretic Text (MT) reads "she whored/fornicated" (זנה) against him, his *pîlegeš*, and she walked or: by walking away from him to her father's home. Since there are no further indications in the story of any other action of "whoring" apart from leaving him, the LXX and other versions read "she became angry with him." The LXX's milder version is preferred by several feminists, partly because often זנה has a broader meaning, including religious infidelity. Considering the general restriction on women's sexuality and divorce, however, a woman leaving her "man" *is* a sexual transgression (there is no biblical law allowing women to initiate divorce; on the other hand, we do not know which laws applied to a *pîlegeš*-wife's sexual behavior or otherwise). Patricia MacKenzie thinks that in a society filled with male transgressions, the verb may be intended to be taken literally;[17] Tammi Schneider wonders that "most scholars simply cannot believe that an Israelite woman would do things that they do not expect her to do."[18] Finally, mention should be made of a different reading proposed by Pamela Reis. She accepts the MT charge that the woman "whored" (זנה), but, taking into account her return to her father's house and also the possible meaning of the preposition על, "on account of," she posits that the Levite may have made his *pîlegeš*-wife work in prostitution for him.[19] Perhaps the issue is not to be easily solved, so that the reader stays alert to the story's complexities.

On verse 3 we opt against NRSV, which makes the Levite come into the house, for the MT reading: "she brought him into her father's home." Since there is no need to modify it, and this is one of the *pîlegeš*-wife's few active actions, I see no reason to change the text.

On verse 25 the Hebrew text is ambiguous as to whether it is the Levite or the Ephraimite host who seizes the *pîlegeš*-wife and expels her: "the man took his *pîlegeš*-wife" may imply the same man or two different ones. Since verses 6-17 speak five times of the Levite as "the man" and the Ephraimite is identified as "the old man" (vv. 17, 20, 22), I interpret the author's reference to the Levite by "the man."

17. MacKenzie, "The Vine of Sodom," 40–43.

18. Schneider, *Judges*, 250.

19. Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "The Levite's Concubine: New Light on a Dark Story," *SJOT* 20 (2006): 125–46.

If anonymity is a literary device to indict the Levite and all other men who do what is right in their own eyes, what are we to think of the women who are also anonymous? Is the Hebrew פילגש "every *pîlegeš*-wife," "every concubine," "every woman," or is she just someone who does not deserve to have a name? Should she be given a name in order to give her existence?[20] While I understand the strategic value of naming her, I opt not to, for the anonymity of every character helps further indict a society in which people are no longer "So-and-so" but only pawns in a game. By the end of the book not only second-rank (or bound) women are no more but the whole region has been erased from the map, several men able for war are dead, their tribe is decimated, and girls are abducted in order to enter forced marriage. Who cares about names anymore?

"A (certain) Levite" in 19:1 also refers to the Levite from Bethlehem, depicted as mercenary and careless about Yahwistic cult in chapter 18 and whose name is only displayed at the end of his narrative. These elements and several others invite intertextual references, particularly to Hagar's situation as an oppressed pregnant slave (Gen 16) and to Lot's confrontation with the men of Sodom (Gen 19:1-26).[21]

### *Use of Irony*

Besides intertextual references, irony is at play through exaggeration and paradox.[22] Particularly interesting is, in my view, Stuart Lasine's assertion that "the narrative [of Judg 19] aims to 'correct' a warped perspective toward the social category of hospitality. In a wider sense, the narrative makes the reader aware of the perverted perspective of those who remain stubbornly oblivious to what is right in the eyes of Yahweh,

20. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 176; see Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 89–92; Mieke Bal, "The Rape of Narrative and the Narrative of Rape: Speech Acts and Body Language in Judges," in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 1–32.

21. The expression הר־אפרים, "mountain region of Ephraim" (v. 1), appears five times in Judges, four of which are in chaps. 17–19, and hardly in other books. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 423, connects its geographical centrality to Ehud's rallying the tribes and Deborah's sitting to judge: "Anything that happened there was likely to have much more than purely local significance." It is also Saul's family land. On intertextuality, see especially Szpek, "The Levite's Concubine," 2–4.

22. Davidson, *Intricacy*, 136.

so that *the reader's perspective* can be 'corrected.'"[23] Among the most notable elements are the Levite's obliviousness to social life and his fixation with his own distorted view of reality as he goes on acting as if nothing had altered his plans. (Does he manage to sleep while the men are raping his woman? Does he really think she may get up and move on in the morning as if nothing had happened to her all night through—that is, supposing she is still alive? Or is the call to rise a proleptic call to the tribes to muster their troops?) The Levite's behavior and the whole situation are so extreme that they go beyond the category of "tragic villainy" and make the audience face "a world in which unpredictability, incongruity, and chaos are the defining features."[24] And in such a world, everything may happen, since neither rationality nor public authorities are in control: "every man did what was right in his eyes."

This is another tool the author uses: stretch the imagination to its extremes to show what may happen when every man does what he wants. Every man's whims bring oppression on the weakest sections of society. In Judges we read about serious oppression of women, children, and sojourners, and it is not far-fetched to assume that the same would have happened to other unprotected groups as well, like the elderly, handicapped, orphaned, foreigners, and animals. After all, whole villages and armies were also brought down to ashes, including Jabesh of Gilead (earlier, Abimelech and Jephthah had also turned against their own people). The right in their own eyes happens to be evil. The contrast between the right in one's own eyes and the right in YHWH's eyes may also convey a sense of irony, since they hardly coincide in Judges.

### *The Protocol of Hospitality*

As part of the motif "night as danger," a sense of foreboding is conveyed as the Levite decides to leave at any cost in the late afternoon of the fifth day: trouble is at hand.[25] The Gibeahites' denial of hospitality

23. Stuart Lasine, "Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot's Hospitality in an Inverted World," *JSOT* 29 (1984): 46. Emphasis in the original.

24. Ibid., 47.

25. Weston W. Fields, "The Motif 'Night as Danger,'" in Fishbane and Tov, *Sha'arei Talmon*, 24–25; Erik Eynikel, "Judges 19–21, An 'Appendix': Rape, Murder, War and Abduction," *CV* 47, no. 2 (2005): 104, notes the foreboding connotation of the number four in these chapters and more generally (for instance, four months before going to fetch her, four days hosted by her father, four hundred girls from Jabesh). Besides day and night, the axis "inside-outside" also plays a key role in this story.

and their later aggression confirms the Levite's imprudence in not leaving early in the day.

From what we know from anthropological studies, hospitality to strangers was a very complex issue, involving an invitation for a certain time from a household or city's male citizen, and the guest's option to accept or reject the invitation. It also involved presents by the guest in exchange for commodities such as food, water, and safe lodging by the host. From the parallel stories in Genesis 19 and Judges 19, it would seem that the right of offering hospitality was denied to residents from another tribe or people (perhaps because they did not own land in that place; either the noun גר, "sojourner," sometimes "foreigner," or the verb גור are used to describe Lot and the Ephraimite).[26] Quite extraordinarily, in Judges a woman also offers hospitality at her tent (Judg 4:18), although, again, she does not possess the land on which she is staying (and, apparently, her tent was a sanctuary).[27]

In Judges 19 there are two occasions when hospitality plays a key role: at the father-in-law's home and at Gibeah. They are contrasted, as one is overgenerous, subject to manipulation, and too long while the other is too short, interrupted by the violent attack of the city's mob.[28] Both occasions for hospitality treat the woman differently, but neither gives her any respect. In the first one there is no word about or to her, except to indicate that she brought the Levite in as he arrived. At her father's home she would belong more to the category of hostess than guest, since she had managed to stay four months there; at any rate, she is not recognized as either in the narrative.[29] The intended bonding between husband and wife is displaced by the father-in-law to son-in-law bond.[30]

26. See Müllner, "Lethal Differences," 135–36; Mark Bartusch, *Understanding Dan: An Exegetical Study of a Biblical City, Tribe and Ancestor* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 134.

27. Ora Brison, "Jael, '*eshet heber* the Kenite: A Diviner?," in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, Texts @ Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 139–60.

28. Jones-Warsaw, "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic," 183, identifies black women with this story's father-in-law because "manipulation has been recognized as one of the few weapons which oppressed persons have had against the oppressor."

29. Davidson, *Intricacy*, 141. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 181, notes this is "the only extensive description . . . of life inside the house, of homeliness" and still we do not hear anything about daughters in it.

30. Susana Becerra Melo, "El cuerpo de la mujer violada y desplazada. Un lugar en donde acontece la revelación-salvación de Dios. Una mirada de género" (MA thesis, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, 2011), 147.

In the second hospitality scene, does the woman belong to the guest party, together with the Levite, his dependant, and the donkeys? Mitzi Smith notes that only the Levite and the donkeys are said to be eating, because in verse 20 the only addressee of the old Benjaminite is the Levite (verb and suffixes are in second-person singular: שלום לך . . . מחסורך . . . אל־תלן); thus, it is possible to read "they ate and drank" in verse 21 as a reference only to the two free males.[31] We do not know what her situation was before the sons of Belial came to claim the Levite: was she part of the party? Was she with the old man's nubile daughter? In the negotiations with the Gibeahites, the old Ephraimite offered both together, but the one seized and brought out is the female guest (v. 25).[32] What about women and hospitality, then? Of course, being offered to an angry mob and repeatedly raped did not belong to the protocol of being a female guest, but what do we know about this protocol in relationship to women? We are not told anything about this woman's situation or her rights as a guest.

The question of status imbalance between a male and a female guest remains open, since there are no positive biblical stories for comparison. Phyllis Trible asserts that the stories of Genesis 19 and Judges 19 "show that rules of hospitality in Israel protect only males," while Jan P. Fokkelman cautions against wrong clichés.[33] In comparing both stories, Trible focuses only on gender inequality and does not see that there is a class component as well. Unlike the *pîlegeš*-wife, throughout the journey the male servant is granted voice; however, he is not offered to the mob, despite their initial request for the male guest. The focus shifts quickly from prospective homosexual rape to actual heterosexual rape, passing by the male servant. The problem lies in the dual and ambiguous situation of a *pîlegeš*-wife: she is the man's wife and, therefore, aggression against and humiliation of her body is also aggression against and humiliation of him; she is also a slave or at least a bound person, thus her status is lower vis-a-vis a male servant when no sexual prerogative is at stake.[34]

31. Smith, "Reading the Story," 26.

32. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 243.

33. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 75. Fokkelman, "Structural Remarks," 44, recognizes the horror of the offers of women in Gen 19 and Judg 19 and remarks that "they show something that happens all over the world: under the pressures of terror and crime, good manners and morals crumble like a house of cards."

34. Szpek, "The Levite's Concubine," 2–3, recalls Hagar; even though she is called "slave," אמה, not פילגש, her situation might help visualize this nameless *pîlegeš*-wife.

The authors have made use of the worst of gender and class oppressions to teach through the *pîlegeš*-wife's fate a painful lesson.[35]

I cannot recall any biblical text in which a travelling woman lodges unaccompanied. This highlights the fact that we do not know how the woman had earlier travelled to her father's household. Did she take a donkey or did she walk? How long did it take her? Could she find any lodging? Could she hide from dangers as darkness fell? Considering the degree of vulnerability of the Levite on his trip back, it is remarkable that the woman had been able to arrive safely to her father's home. Ironically, she was better off on her own than with male protection![36]

### *Rape as a Weapon*

Although several scholars have already made this point, it is worth repeating: rape is the Gibeahites' sin, not homosexuality. Rape is a crime because it uses sex aggressively, nonconsensually, as weapon against a victim.[37] Rape is a torture weapon, a war weapon, and a genocidal weapon in times of peace, as Susanne Scholz reminds us:

> Rape is an expression of dominion that systematically and effectively submits groups of people whether they are defined by race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or gender, and "does in genocide what it does in misogyny." Hence, MacKinnon stresses that rape constitutes a violation of human rights in times of war and peace. . . .
>
> When the disturbing stories [of Judg 19–21] are read as part of the struggle to eliminate sexual abuse and rape during war and peace, they illustrate that the Hebrew Bible preserves stories about the relentless

35. Readers might be wondering whether this is a "true story" or not. The mere fact that almost twenty years into the twenty-first century women (and some men, and particularly children) are enslaved, forced into prostitution, and submitted to gang rape and that dismembered bodies are still found forbids our dismissing the story as a literary invention. See Smith, "Reading the Story," 15–33, for current stories of enslavement and forced prostitution in the United States; see also Stacie Donaldson, "Not in Our City," in *Combating Human Trafficking: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Michael J. Palmiotto (Boca Ratón: CRC Press, 2015), 219–30.

36. Travelling by herself she was not perceived as an object for an honor contest, as at Gibeah. Nonetheless, one should not ignore how dangerous a situation could be (still is!) for a young woman travelling alone.

37. Jones-Warsaw, "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic," 182, rightly alerts against the use of "victim" as someone's only identity, for "it elevates a single negative aspect of an entire life, and negates all the other creative and positive aspects" and roles that person plays in society.

> prevalence of rape in women's and men's lives. It can and perhaps must be read as a witness to the idea that rape is a violation of human rights.[38]

In his dialogue with the inhabitants of Gibeah, the host evaluates the town men's intention as an evil action (Hebrew root רעע, v. 23) and "a vile thing" (נבלה, vv. 23, 24). In the biblical mind-set, it is worse when combined with homosexuality, "a doubly potent symbol of acultural, non-civilized behavior from the Israelite point of view."[39] It adds the breach of prohibition of homoerotic male relationships to the forceful, unwelcome use of another person's sexuality (Lev 18:22), but unwelcome use of the *pîlegeš*-wife's and the nubile daughter's sexuality do not amount to so much נבלה!

### *Dismemberment of the* Pîlegeš*-Wife: An Unlikely Sacrifice*

Perhaps in order to protect the Levite from further crime, the Hebrew text is ambiguous as to this woman's death. Her last action is to have fallen onto the Ephraimite's house's threshold sometime in the early morning, where her master finds her as he comes out. His only words are "Get up, we are going!" But there is no answer, so he takes her, puts her on the donkey, and goes home. It is unclear whether she had already died when he seized her (חזק, "lay hold"), took the knife (with the article appearing only here and in Gen 22:6, 10), and dismembered her, sending each limb to one of the tribes throughout the territory. Even if clinically alive, she had already been robbed of any agency.

By sacrificing his *pîlegeš*-wife, the Levite finally has rendered himself unfit for his priestly office and has also, in a typically patriarchal attitude, renounced his own feelings of love toward his wife.[40] Since cutting the sacrificial victims into pieces was part of the Levitical tasks (see, for instance, Exod 29:17; Lev 1), this Levite would recognize the resemblance

38. Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 139; reference to Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Genocide's Sexuality," in *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 209–33, at 226.

39. Niditch, "The 'Sodomite' Theme," 369. See also Lasine, "Guest and Host," 37–59; James Harding, "Homophobia and Masculine Domination," 41–74.

40. Mercedes Navarro Puerto, "Cuerpos invisibles, cuerpos necesarios. Cuerpos de mujeres en la Biblia: exégesis y psicología," in *Para comprender el cuerpo de la mujer. Una perspectiva bíblica y ética*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto (Estella: Verbo Divino, 1996), 160; Becerra Melo, "El cuerpo de la mujer violada y desplazada," 155 n. 320.

and differences between a pure, acceptable sacrificial animal and his wife, whom he has animalized.[41]

Lauren Monroe compares several stories of women in the Hebrew Bible, in which sacrificial jargon is used:

> Although Judges 19 and Numbers 25 are not explicitly about human sacrifice, each employs the vocabulary of sacrifice to describe the murder of a woman. Outside of anti-child sacrifice polemics, Judges 11; 19; and Numbers 25 provide the only examples in the Hebrew Bible of the killing of a single human being by Israelite hands where sacrificial language is used. Yet, with the exception of Judges 11, they have not been considered part of the text base for studying Israelite attitudes toward human sacrifice, nor has the sacrificial language in Judges 19 and Numbers 25 been fully explored. The female gender of the victims can hardly be coincidence; yet, the texts do not bear the signs of literary dependence, suggesting that they are shaped by certain Israelite attitudes toward human sacrifice and gender that transcend textual specificity.[42]

### *Household Relations as a Mirror of the Broader Community's Relationships*

The main relationship in chapter 19 is that of the Levite to the woman, introduced by the expression "he took a woman, a *pîlegeš*-wife" (v. 1). I consider theirs to be the main relationship because it is the most significant both socially and in terms of plot. Most other characters are set in reference to these two: "her father," "his father-in-law," "his wife." The Levite might have had an additional wife or wives, but if so, they do not appear in the story. Likewise, no child is mentioned, so we do not hear anything like Jephthah's lament over the end of his house by sacrificing his daughter (chap. 11). Why is progeny not an issue for this Levite?

With due caution, I take her status of *pîlegeš*-wife to be that of a wife (thus, with sexual attachment to her husband) and also that of a bound woman (thus, with fewer rights than a free Israelite). What rights and responsibilities pertained to such a legal category we do not know, and

41. María de los Angeles Roberto, "La mujer como botín de guerra en América Latina. Un análisis interdisciplinario a partir de la lectura del libro de Jueces 19–21" (unpublished, Buenos Aires, 2013), 8; available at: https://www.academia.edu/7892075/La_mujer_como_bot%C3%ADn_de_guerra_en_Am%C3%A9rica_Latina.

42. Lauren A. S. Monroe, "Disembodied Women: Sacrificial Language and the Deaths of Bat-Jephthah, Cozbi, and the Bethlehemite Concubine," *CBQ* 75 (2013): 33.

therefore, interpretation of her, his, and her father's actions becomes risky, though unavoidable. Interpretation is also necessary to find meaning, because throughout the chapter the semantics of family and slavery are mixed. Koala Jones-Warsaw has pointed to the use of legal terminology when the father-in-law makes a demand on the Levite and "more casual terms" when the Levite heeds him.[43] She further notes how, as their relationship deteriorates (v. 26), "the labels moved from describing an intimate relationship (husband) to a more objective, functional relationship (lord)."[44] From a narratological point of view, form fits content. Chaos is represented by a chaotic depiction of family relations, where people no longer fit their expected roles: a *pîlegeš*-wife takes the initiative of returning to her father's home; a husband-master invests considerable resources in travelling to bring her back, only to give her up and even dismember her as they return; a resident alien is the only one within the Benjaminite city to offer hospitality.

In light of the *pîlegeš*-wife's status being closer to an enslaved person than to a free wife, the Levite's retrieval of her despite her breach of contract (called somewhat loosely "fornication"), her being mentioned after the male attendant (v. 10), and his total disregard for her well-being would make more sense than if we are thinking of a marital relation—for we would like to think that husbands do not treat their wives in such a way. Likewise, her father's hospitality might be seen as a desire to appease a master who had seen his property endangered and had come all the way to claim it (her) back. One might even imagine that the woman herself, her father, and her master would have entertained the possibility of her being punished for her desertion; thus perhaps the father's overbearing hospitality was out of concern for his daughter's well-being, trying to avert her tragedy. One cannot rule out the possibility that there was nothing to consider but her return "home," that social and economic family (=patriarchal) conventions and interests prevented even the question of whether she could remain at her father's household.[45]

43. Jones-Warsaw, "Toward a Womanist Hermeneutic," 175.

44. Ibid., 177 n. 3.

45. Cf. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 84–91, interprets the woman's return to her father's house as a return to the proper place within a *beena*-marriage and her unfaithfulness not toward her husband but toward her father, by having previously moved out with her husband. Thus, the Levite's purpose of seeking her to speak to her heart would be his (successful) attempt to convince her to move to his location and leave the father.

Another aspect of their household relation as a mirror to those of the community is that intercourse (sexual and otherwise) among the different actors mirrors those within Israel and between Israel and its neighbors. The unlawful rape of one woman develops into massive killings and also the legal rape of six hundred girls, robbed to become Benjamin's mothers.[46] The dismemberment of one woman will eventuate a further dismemberment of the tribes. Distrust and lack of amicable relations with neighboring nations leads to mutual destruction among the tribes (the Levite had on purpose avoided Jebus because it did not belong to Israel). This is a community that perceives itself as vulnerable, but rather than close ranks around its weakest members (the two women offered are dependent on their respective males in Gibeah), they give them up and then get to kill one another.

In these chapters, lack of communication is indicative of the increasing deterioration of the dialogue within Israel and between the people and their God. The Levite waits for four months before going after his wife with the explicit intention (in the narrator's voice) of speaking to her heart, an expression for seeking a positive answer from her to his requests.[47] Taking a clue from the Greek version of the story that she had become angry and left him (v. 3), we are alerted to domestic violence, in which often after a break by the victim of violence there is what is called a honeymoon stage. "Familial fissures or acts of abuse are frequently followed by attempts at reconciliation in the Hebrew Bible, as in 19:3 (cf. Gen 34:3; Hos 2:14 [MT16])."[48] Yet, even if that was the case and the Levite wanted reconciliation, his only uttered words to the woman are the command "Get up, we are going" at the Ephraimite's threshold. In a similar manner and in stark contrast to Judges 1, there is no dialogue

46. Davidson, *Intricacy*, 134, considers it black comedy; she further notes, 138, that while tragedy leads to death, "comedy reintegrates everyone back into society. That is why comedies end in marriages."

47. Here again, family and legal status is blurred, for if she was unfree, why would he *need* her consent to take her back to the Ephraim hills? The same expression, "to speak to the heart of," appears in Hos 2:16 (YHWH's attempt to change Israel's stubborn ways) and Gen 34:3 (Shechem speaking to Dinah after he had taken her sexually without consent from her or from her father). Regarding the length of his delay to go after her, there are several explanations offered. Schneider, *Judges*, 252–53, connects those four months to the period to know whether she would be pregnant (see Gen 38:24).

48. Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 192.

between the woman and her father. The woman speaks only through her broken and scattered body.

The twofold otherness of the Levite as stranger among his own people and as "feminized" (in quotation marks to indicate that using "feminized" for "robbed of honor" perpetuates the idea that being a woman is less desirable than being a man) are reversed with his power to bring all the tribes to war in his support, while the twofold otherness of the *pîlegeš*-wife as a stranger in the city and as a woman whose sexuality has been given to any man is reversed by killing her and by preventing her from rest at a grave![49] The honor-bound idea that "if the woman can't be mine, she will be no-one's" is acted upon by the Levite, so that "she is no longer flesh, she is nothing."[50] And just as the relationship of the Levite to his *pîlegeš*-wife ends up destroyed, the tribes that had started up under God's guidance (Judg 1), go up and practically annihilate Benjamin, Jabesh-Gilead, and Shiloh (Judg 20–21) while YHWH speaks darkly to them.

> Why does the narrator not bluntly say that the behavior of the Levite was thoughtless, or even wicked? Because the power of the story lies not in the hard ethical answers it offers, but in its capacity to provoke the moral imagination of its readers. The narrator's account stirs the reader not to quick and easy judgment, but to ponder the complexities of human motivation and relationships, and the mysteries of human nature.[51]

Complex are, indeed, relationships and motivations in this story. And complexity increases as the Levite seeks restoration for his wounded ego after the Gibeahites' attempt to rape him and commission of rape against his woman.

## The Violence against the Levite—Told by Himself (20:1-11)

Although chapter 20 cannot be understood apart from its preceding chapter, it carries its own amount of violence. In terms of human lives, it exponentially multiplies the violence suffered earlier at the old Ephraimite's home.

49. Müllner, "Lethal Differences," 140–42.

50. Mercedes Navarro Puerto, "El sacrificio del cuerpo femenino en la Biblia Hebrea: Jueces 11 (la hija de Jefté) y 19 (la mujer del levita)," *Ciudad de Mujeres* (May 3, 2006): 24, http://www.ciudaddemujeres.com/articulos/El-sacrificio-del-cuerpo-femenino.

51. Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 42.

*Judges 20:1-11*

20:1Then all the Israelites came out,
from Dan to Beer-sheba, including the
land of Gilead, and the congregation
assembled in one body before the
LORD at Mizpah. 2The chiefs of all the
people, of all the tribes of Israel, pre-
sented themselves in the assembly of
the people of God, four hundred thou-
sand foot-soldiers bearing arms. 3(Now
the Benjaminites heard that the people
of Israel had gone up to Mizpah.) And
the Israelites said, "Tell us, how did this
criminal act come about?" 4The Levite,
the husband of the woman who was
murdered answered, "I came to Gibeah
that belongs to Benjamin, I and my con-
cubine, to spend the night. 5The lords
of Gibeah rose up against me, and
surrounded the house at night. They
intended to kill me, and they raped my
concubine until she died. 6Then I took
my concubine and cut her into pieces,
and sent her throughout the whole ex-
tent of Israel's territory; for they have
committed a vile outrage in Israel. 7So
now, you Israelites, all of you, give your
advice and counsel here."

8All the people got up as one, saying,
"We will not any of us go to our tents, nor
will any of us return to our houses. 9But
now this is what we will do to Gibeah: we
will go up against it by lot. 10We will take
ten men of a hundred throughout all the
tribes of Israel, and a hundred of a thou-
sand, and a thousand of ten thousand,
to bring provisions for the troops, who
are going to repay Gibeah of Benjamin
for all the disgrace that they have done
in Israel." 11So all the men of Israel gath-
ered against the city, united as one.

The chapter is comprised of two scenes. In the first one, verses 1-11, the whole assembly, gathered in front of YHWH, listened to the Levite's version of "how has this evil thing happened" (v. 3) and sought to eradicate the evildoers from Gibeah. The Levite's account differs from the narrator's version in that it attributes murderous designs to the men of Gibeah, while silencing his own responsibility for the events. His words "*me* they sought to kill, and they forced/raped my *pîlegeš*-wife and she is dead" are a half lie, hiding much important information. The Levite might or might not have personally murdered her, but the narrator makes clear that he is not an upright person: besides showing his words to the assembly to be different from what was narrated in chapter 19, in 20:4 she is "the murdered woman," האשה הנרצחה, thus clearly stating that "and she died" (v. 5) means she was murdered. The ambiguity on whose final action killed her can be read as the narrator's complicity with the Levite. I find this device an excellent way to put the blame on all males who contest male honor over their women's bodies. Not long after this

scene, "all the sons of Israel" will be fighting over "kingship, tribal war, and male honor,"[52] annihilating each other in battle and putting every Benjaminite city to the sword.[53]

## National Violence to Avenge Personal Violence (20:12-48)

The following scene is the war against Gibeah and Benjamin, the result of which is much destruction and death: death of soldiers from both armies and death of whole populations from every town of the tribe of Benjamin. The question as to why YHWH allowed two defeats of the united tribes before the last battle—or, conversely, why YHWH allowed Benjamin's defeat after two victories—is neither raised nor answered by the text. The narrator seems to be as hesitant as the warriors here: for instance, there is admiration for the Benjaminite army of left-handed sling warriors, who resemble Ehud (3:12-30). In 20:44 they are presented as "brave men" and also, all of them, as prefiguring Saul. Another possible hint lies in the fact that, although Israel twice sought oracles from YHWH, they were not seeking God's guidance but God's support for what they had already decided (compare vv. 23-28).[54] Perhaps YHWH had decided to abstain from bloodshed, considering that both sides were going to fight for the wrong, "immediate and personal," reasons.[55] Perhaps, as Jacqueline Lapsley and Mercedes Navarro Puerto surmise, it is the readers' task to exonerate them or not.[56]

52. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 241.

53. Frank M. Yamada, *Configurations of Rape in the Hebrew Bible*, StBibLit 109 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) examines three rape narratives: Dinah's in Gen 34, Tamar's in 2 Sam 13, and the woman in Judg 19. He finds that they "display a similar configuration of an initial rape that leads to further retributive violence among males and results in some kind of social fragmentation" (133). According to his study, Judg 19–21 "move the rape of this woman toward the most extensive display of violence and social breakdown among the rape texts" (135).

54. Lillian A. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 179; Georg Hentschel and Christina Nieβen, "Der Bruderkrieg zwischen Israel und Benjamin (Ri 20)," *Bib* 89 (2008): 23. Pressler conjectures that the relationship was "so deteriorated that it was no longer possible for them to hear the divine word" (*Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 253).

55. Schneider, *Judges*, 271. For instance, they fail to request at least two witnesses before proclaiming the Gibeahites "scoundrels" to be put to death (v. 13).

56. See Navarro Puerto, *Violencia, sexismo, silencio*, 110.

*Judges 20:12-48*

12The tribes of Israel sent men
through all the tribe of Benjamin, say-
ing, "What crime is this that has been
committed among you? 13Now then,
hand over those scoundrels in Gibeah,
so that we may put them to death, and
purge the evil from Israel." But the Ben-
jaminites would not listen to their kins-
folk, the Israelites. 14The Benjaminites
came together out of the towns to Gi-
beah, to go out to battle against the Is-
raelites. 15On that day the Benjaminites
mustered twenty-six thousand armed
men from their towns, besides the in-
habitants of Gibeah. 16Of all this force,
there were seven hundred picked men
who were left-handed, every one could
sling a stone at a hair, and not miss.
17And the Israelites, apart from Benja-
min, mustered four hundred thousand
armed men, all of them warriors.

18The Israelites proceeded to go
up to Bethel, where they inquired of
God, "Which of us shall go up first to
battle against the Benjaminites?" And
the Lord answered, "Judah shall go
up first."

19Then the Israelites got up in the
morning, and encamped against Gi-
beah. 20The Israelites went out to battle
against Benjamin; and the Israelites
drew up the battle line aginst them at
Gibeah. 21The Benjaminites came out
of Gibeah, and struck down on that
day twenty-two thousand of the Is-
raelites. 23The Israelites went up and
wept before the Lord until the evening;
and they inquired of the Lord, "Shall
we again draw near to battle against
our kinsfolk the Benjaminites?" And
the Lord said, "Go up against them."
22The Israelites took courage, and
again formed the battle line in the same
place where they had formed it on the
first day.

24So the Israelites advanced against
the Benjaminites the second day. 25Ben-
jamin moved out against them from Gi-
beah the second day, and struck down
eighteen thousand of the Israelites, all
of them armed men. 26Then all the Is-
raelites, the whole army, went back to
Bethel and wept, sitting there before
the Lord; they fasted that day until
evening. Then they offered burnt offer-
ings and sacrifices of well-being before
the Lord. 27And the Israelites inquired
of the Lord (for the ark of the cove-
nant of God was there in those days,
28and Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of
Aaron, ministered before it in those
days), saying, "Shall we go out once
more to battle against our kinsfolk the
Benjaminites, or shall we desist?" The
Lord answered, "Go up, for tomorrow I
will give them into your hand."

29So Israel stationed men in ambush
around Gibeah. 30Then the Israelites
went up against the Benjaminites on the
third day, and set themselves in array
against Gibeah, as before. 31When the
Benjaminites went out against the army,
they were drawn away from the city. As
before they began to inflict casualties
on the troops, along the main roads,
one of which goes up to Bethel and
the other to Gibeah, as well as in the
open country, killing about thirty men
of Israel. 32The Benjaminites thought,
"They are being routed before us, as
previously." But the Israelites said, "Let
us retreat and draw them away from

*Judges 20:12-48 (cont.)*

the city toward the roads." [33]The main body of the Israelites drew back its battle line to Baal-tamar, while those Israelites who were in ambush rushed out of their place west of Geba. [34]There came against Gibeah ten thousand picked men out of all Israel, and the battle was fierce. But the Benjaminites did not realize that disaster was close upon them.

[35]The LORD defeated Benjamin before Israel; and the Israelites destroyed twenty-five thousand one hundred men of Benjamin that day, all of them armed.

[36]Then the Benjaminites saw that they were defeated.

The Israelites gave ground to Benjamin, because they trusted to the troops in ambush that they had stationed against Gibeah. [37]The troops in ambush rushed quickly upon Gibeah. Then they put the whole city to the sword. [38]Now the agreement between the main body of Israel and the men in ambush was that when they sent up a cloud of smoke out of the city [39]the main body of Israel should turn in battle. But Benjamin had begun to inflict casualties on the Israelites, killing about thirty of them; so they thought, "Surely they are defeated before us, as in the first battle." [40]But when the cloud, a column of smoke, began to rise out

*This Evil (Thing)*

Three expressions are used by different people to refer to what may be termed "outrage" in Judges 19–21: (a) the term הרעה (הזות) "(this) evil (or evil thing)" in the inquiry about the events that led to the nameless woman's dismemberment (20:3) and in the tribes' inquiry throughout all Benjamin (20:12); (b) "senselessness" or "disgrace" (נבלה), used by the Ephraimite host (19:23, 24), in 20:6 in the Levite's version of the events, and in the people's speech in 20:10; and (c) "lewdness" or "wantonness" (זמה, together with נבלה, 20:6) as the Levite scatters the woman's limbs throughout the land. Since all three nouns are feminine, "this evil (thing)" or "this senselessness" may refer to the assault at Gibeah, to the slain woman, or even to the limb received. The first occurrence of נבלה happens in the Ephraimite's argument, as he tries to prevent the mob from attacking his guest (19:23-24). He uses two parallel sentences separated by the grounds for his petition: "do not act so wickedly [רעה]. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing" (נבלה + תעשו + על). As he offers the two women, he reiterates the noun in a stronger expression: לוא תעשו דבר הנבלה הזות, "do not do such a vile thing," a worse thing, in their view, than ravishing the women. נבלה appears also in 20:6, together with another term, זמה. The noun זמה, from the root זמם, "to plot," appears only

of the city, the Benjaminites looked behind them—and there was the whole city going up in smoke toward the sky! [41]Then the main body of Israel turned, and the Benjaminites were dismayed, for they saw that disaster was close upon them. [42]Therefore they turned away from the Israelites in the direction of the wilderness; but the battle overtook them, and those who came out of the city were slaughtering them in between. [43]Cutting down the Benjaminites, they pursued them from Nohah and trod them down as far as a place east of Gibeah. [44]Eighteen thousand Benjaminites fell, all of them courageous fighters. [45]When they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, five thousand of them were cut down on the main roads, and they were pursued as far as Gidom, and two thousand of them were slain. [46]So all who fell that day of Benjamin were twenty-five thousand arms-bearing men, all of them courageous fighters. [47]But six hundred turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon, and remained at the rock of Rimmon for four months. [48]Meanwhile, the Israelites turned back against the Benjaminites, and put them to the sword—the city, the people, the animals, and all that remained. Also the remaining towns they set on fire.

thirty times in the Bible; Judges 20:6 is the only instance in the Deuteronomistic History. Since זמה is most at home in poetic texts, it is notable that the only three times it occurs in the Pentateuch are in laws, two of which deal with incestuous relationships (Lev 18:17; 20:14).[57] Of interest for us here might be the preoccupation with the daughter's sexual safety by forbidding what is termed זמה in those laws. The remaining pertinent cases are in prophetic oracles, particularly Ezekiel 16 and 23, which, like Judges 19, are among the Bible's most virulent utterances against women. The particular connection of the term זמה with texts extremely harmful to women seems to be more than a coincidence. Could זמה be a hermeneutical key for Judges 19? And if so, would it function in order to sanction or to denounce the violence against the Levite's *pîlegeš*-wife? Even though it may be read in different ways (Ezekiel is an example), זמה offers a clue to see the text as a critique of violent, misogynistic times.

57. The third law (Lev 19:29) is unclear, as it seems to merge the literal and the figurative meanings: "Do not prostitute your daughter, to cause her to be a whore; lest the land fall to whoredom, and the land become full of wickedness." Davidson, *Intricacy*, 142, notes that the term in Leviticus "concerns the sexual abuse of women."

*"He's My Brother!"*

The question of belonging to Israel (or who is Israel) plays a role throughout the book. Thus, it causes no surprise to find it written large in the last chapters. The sought-for unity of the people seems to have been achieved in chapter 20: expressions such as "as one man," "the children of Israel," "the whole assembly," and "my brother" point to it. But has it? Benjamin was apparently not convened: "the Benjaminites heard that the Israelites had gone up to Mizpah" (20:3). Was one of the woman's limbs not sent to them?

At any rate, the fight between Benjamin and כל־בני ישראל, "all the sons of Israel," or כל־איש ישראל, "every man of Israel," makes "unity" an elusive concept.[58] There are further reasons to view such a unity with suspicion. In this narrative even the most inclusive terms, such as "the whole assembly" or "the children of Israel" would include only the males able to fight. This is hinted at in that those assembled are those who are not to go back to their tents until evil has been eradicated from Israel by putting to death the culprits (v. 8), an action that eventually will happen only after some bloody battles. Not only is the concept of unity denied by the lack of inclusion of women (and of certain men) in that decision-making assembly, but the text also casts a shadow on the concept of kin held by this chapter.

The noun "brother," אח, appears in varying ways twenty-nine times in Judges. A few of them are of no interest to us at this point, such as those related to Othniel, Samson, and the tribes of Simeon or Dan talking to their brethren (chaps. 1–3, 13–16, 18). Other instances tell us much, especially because they abound where the people's unity is at high risk. For instance, considering how much the events in chapter 9 are determined by differences between Gideon's family and that of his secondary wife from Shechem, it is not happenstance that "brother" occurs twelve times in that chapter! The term appears again in the other story originating from a similar situation of imbalance between brothers from different mothers in 11:3, where Jephthah's brothers from his paternal side expel

58. Hentschel and Nieβen, "Der Bruderkrieg," 28–29, disentangle these two traditions; see Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, AB 6A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 183; Trent Butler, "Joshua–Judges and Postcolonial Criticism," in Brenner and Yee, *Joshua and Judges*, 27–38, on the complexity of separating colonizer from colonized and "Israelite" from "Other" in Joshua and Judges. E. Theodore Mullen, "Judges 1:1-36: The Deuteronomistic Reintroduction of the Book of Judges," *HTR* 77 (1984): 42, notes the explicit use of "all Israel" only in "2:4 (the messenger's indictment); 8:27 (Gideon's ephod); and 20:1 (the Gibeah outrage). Neither consistent leadership nor national unity is an ideal maintained in the Book of Judges."

him, so that he does not inherit with them. The term does not occur again in that chapter. Is that surprising in light of the internecine war between Gilead (Jephthah's homeland) and Ephraim (12:1-7)?

Coming now to our story, the first occurrence of the noun אח, "brother," occurs on the lips of the Ephraimite, as he tries to protect his guest: "No, my brothers, don't do this evil," he pleads (19:23). In chapter 20, the plural אחים is used to refer to the relationship between Benjamin and the other tribes (20:13, they did not listen to their brethren the Israelites and did not give up the Gibeahites). As the assembled Israelites seek YHWH's victory, the noun "my brother," אחי, is used twice in their inquiry about war against Benjamin (20:23, 28). Finally, the narrator reports that the Israelites had compassion for Benjamin their brother and sought a way for it not to be banished from among the tribes (21:6). Thus, brotherhood turns out to be both a unifying and a disruptive concept.

All in all, I find this chapter unnecessarily militaristic, especially considering the Bible's usual frugality in descriptions (even if explainable as source duplication). Other battles in Judges are recounted briefly: Barak's battle against Sisera and Gideon's takeover of the Midianite camp take up approximately seven verses each (4:10-16; 7:16-25). More telling is the narrative about Jephthah, in which his negotiation with the Ammonites (11:12-29) is much longer than the battle itself (vv. 32-33). Samson's fights are individual acts of vengeance described in a few verses at most (14:19; 15:14-15). The only long reports beside chapter 20 are Abimelech's fights (9:22-57). Perhaps this is not a coincidence, since Abimelech is not a judge but a self-made king, and his enemies are not the Midianites or the Canaanites but his own kinsfolk (recall the twelve references to "brother" in chapter 9). By assigning large portions of text and particular jargon to issues of internal struggle, the author subtly criticizes a society where not all brothers are brothers—and where sisters are conspicuously absent. This account may very well also be saying that war is "an often pointless round of battles; power rises and falls, and justice is difficult to determine."[59]

## As in the Beginning: Girls Traded between Warriors (21:1-25)

This last story is loosely related to Judges 19 and 20. A sacred assembly at Mizpah and Benjamin's critical decimation are mentioned, but particular references to previous events (such as the war that left only six hundred Benjaminites alive) are vague. Verses 1 and 5 make reference

59. Niditch, *Judges*, 203.

*Judges 21:1-25*

21:1Now the Israelites had sworn at
Mizpah, "No one of us shall give his
daughter in marriage to Benjamin."
2And the people came to Bethel, and
sat there until evening before God, and
they lifted up their voice and wept bit-
terly. 3They said, "O LORD, the God of
Israel, why has it come to pass that
today there should be one tribe lack-
ing in Israel?" 4On the next day, the
people got up early, and built an altar
there, and offered burnt offerings and
sacrifices of well-being. 5Then the Is-
raelites said, "Which of all the tribes of
Israel did not come up in the assem-
bly to the LORD?" For a solemn oath
had been taken concerning whoever
did not come up to the LORD to Miz-
pah, saying, "That one shall be put to
death." 6But the Israelites had compas-
sion for Benjamin their kin, and said,
"One tribe is cut off from Israel this day.
7What shall we do for wives for those
who are left, since we have sworn by
the LORD that we will not give them any
of our daughters as wives?"

8Then they said, "Is there anyone
from the tribes of Israel who did not
come up to the LORD to Mizpah?" It
turned out that no one from Jabesh-
gilead had come to the camp, to the
assembly. 9For when the roll was called
among the people, not one of the inhab-
itants of Jabesh-gilead was there. 10So
the congregation sent twelve thousand
soldiers there and commanded them,
"Go, put the inhabitants of Jabesh-
gilead to the sword, including the

to vows not mentioned earlier concerning Benjamin, thus taking the audience by surprise.

The narrator begins by informing the reader that the men at Mizpah had vowed not to give their daughters in marriage to Benjamin. Since besides the warriors every Benjaminite city had been utterly destroyed (20:48), they trapped Benjamin and themselves. E. T. A. Davidson notes that, like children, "they do not seem to be able to connect cause with effect" and weep bitterly to YHWH that one tribe will be erased.[60]

Not only weapons kill: this is not the first rash vow to be paid dearly by someone other than the one who made the vow. In Judges, the verb שבע ("to swear") appears six times, three of which are in this chapter; one positive vow is made by the Judahites to Samson, that they will not kill him but only give him over to the Phillistines (15:12-13). The noun נדר is used twice in chapter 11 in reference to Jephthah's vow, at the cost of his only young daughter. There are also other examples of "bad words," such as Micah's mother's curse on whomever had stolen her silver,

60. Davidson, *Intricacy*, 135.

women and the little ones. 11This is what you shall do; every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction." 12And they found among the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead four hundred young virgins who had never slept with a man and brought them to the camp at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan.

13Then the whole congregation sent word to the Benjaminites who were at the rock of Rimmon, and proclaimed peace to them. 14Benjamin returned at that time; and they gave them the women whom they had saved alive of the women of Jabesh-gilead; but they did not suffice for them.

15The people had compassion on Benjamin because the LORD had made a breach in the tribes of Israel. 16So the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do for wives for those who are left, since there are no women left in Benjamin?" 17And they said, "There must be heirs for the survivors of Benjamin, in order that a tribe may not be blotted out from Israel. 18Yet we cannot give any of our daughters to them as wives." For the Israelites had sworn, "Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to Benjamin." 19So they said, "Look, the yearly festival of the LORD is taking place at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah." 20And they instructed the Benjaminites, saying, "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, 21and

which is turned into a consecrated cultic object of dubious benefit for YHWH's people (17:2). One may add Caleb's vow to give his daughter to whomever took Kiriath-sepher. Vows are a serious matter, especially when society does not provide instances for checking on male-uttered wild ones (see Num 30). Ironically, in this chapter oaths are taken seriously enough to kidnap (and destroy the families of) six hundred girls, while at the same time costless for those who had uttered the vows.[61]

> If the sacrificial scene and the larger story of the traveling Levite and his wife are understood as foundation myth, an alternate interpretation emerges that is less bound to suggestions concerning a promonarchic stance. The woman is a visceral symbol of Israel's body politic, anticipating the way in which Israel is to be torn asunder by the civil war that follows her murder. This sort of chaos, often including murder within the family followed by battle, is necessary to contrast with and motivate the foundation of a new order. The woman's dismemberment, like a world-altering event, leads to actual war out of which emerge a

61. Schneider, *Judges*, 282–83.

*Judges 21:1-25 (cont.)*

watch; when the young women of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and each of you carry off a wife for himself from the young women of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. 22Then if their fathers or their bothers come to complain to us, we will say to them, 'Be generous and allow us to have them; because we did not capture in battle a wife for each man. But neither did you incur guilt by giving your daughters to them.'" 23The Benjaminites did so; they took wives for each of them from the dancers whom they abducted. Then they went and returned to their territory, and rebuilt the towns, and lived in them. 24So the Israelites departed from there at that time by tribes and families, and they went out from there to their own territories. 25In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

> new order, peace, and reconciliation between men. The reconciliation is achieved through the distribution of women. The women are viewed as captured commodities; they are exchange items that achieve unity between those who participate in the exchange, as are the pieces of an animal carcass that create community at a sacrificial feast. Thus this story begins with the sacrifice of a woman, continues with demands for shared responsibility, and ends with the sacrifice of women, the exchanges by which men form or symbolize relationships. In Judges 19–21 the women themselves have no say in the matter.[62]

### *The Girls Become the Gift of "Peace"*

The united tribes finally find a way out of their dilemma between, on the one hand, finding a way for Benjamin to survive as a tribe and, on the other hand, upholding their oath of keeping their women away from Benjamin. It is, however, no better than the Gibeahites' earlier crime. They identify a town that did not answer their call to war (and had thus not vowed anything), send twelve thousand (!) warriors, and kill the whole population except for the girls who have not yet had sexual relationships. This provides them with a gift to make peace with the surviving six hundred Benjaminites. Yet, since they still needed at least two hundred wives, they are told to go to the annual vineyard festival at Shiloh and abduct women from there. As Davidson notes,

62. Niditch, *Judges*, 194.

> What is funny is that the Israelites in their zeal are oblivious to the fact that not only have they invented a fairly preposterous way of supplying wives . . . , but also their method of doing so *contradicts* their moral case against Benjamin. Though on a literal, realistic level, it is no more amusing that Jabesh-Gilead is utterly destroyed than that the city of Laish was annihilated (18.27), the Israelites have a reason—which they construct as valid—for declaring a ban on Jabesh-Gilead: it did not respond to the muster.[63]

Lest the reader romanticize these stories, the narrator is careful not to soften its tone: "The phrase translated 'lie in wait' is the same word used to describe the ambush of Gibeah in Judges 20:37. Apart from military situations, the verb is found in contexts of violence and wickedness."[64] These two verbs, ארב, "to lie in wait," and גזל,"carry off, abduct," are also used in the Bible to denote crimes (see Judg 9:25; Ps 10:9).[65] In the narrator's eyes, however, the Israelites are worse than the Benjaminites: they not only suggest the hijacking but also commit themselves to dismiss the complaints (or suits) they already foresee coming from the girls' fathers and brothers (v. 22). They mention only the generosity they expect from them in allowing their daughters to be taken, while passing over the social and economic consequences of such loot.

### *"Take My Daughters . . . ": Concluding Comments*

The narratives in Judges 19–21 show that misogyny, rape, and war are interrelated structures of oppression and link to other social categories of domination. In such structures, women are viewed as goods, to be used and even abused, eventually murdered and cut into pieces. Sometimes they are there "for the taking" and to be married off. They are objects of the male actors whose needs they are fulfilling. In such an androcentric setting, the problem posed for readers is what to do with such stories. Shall we be complicit and accept assumptions of phallocentric superiority, or be aware of the links of misogyny,

63. Davidson, *Intricacy*, 136.

64. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 256. Niditch, *Judges*, 208, attributes to Gayle Rubin ("The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975], 157–210) coinage of the phrase "the traffic in women" to refer to exchange of women "for the purposes of reconciliation between warring groups of men."

65. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 256–57.

rape, and established hierarchies of sociopolitical and economic life? Unquestionably, the latter is required because it turns the meaning of Judges 19–21 into highly relevant literature that illustrates destructive societal forces. They create sociopolitical, economic, and religious hierarchies that place some people above others. In the narratives of Judges 19–21, all women become victims of a phallocentric order that benefits male characters. This order begets violence, and so Judges 19–21 is brutal and bloody. It begins with one woman's gruesome fate, her gang-rape and subsequent murder, followed by wartime murder of a whole tribe and the gang-rape of many women. In the metaphoric language of biblical prose, Judges 19–21 illustrates the misogyny during so-called peacetime and the prevalence of rape during war. The ordeal is a reminder of the pervasive and persisting problem in androcentric societies: misogyny and rape are connected problems within a long tradition that stretches back to the stories in the book of Judges. They can help even contemporary readers to face the horrors of today's ongoing sexual violations of women, children and some men during peacetime and war.[66]

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The fact that the story resembles stories of rape and/or abduction from other ancient cultures does not take away their poison. Comparing our text and the legend of the abduction of the Sabine women, Robert Gnuse notes: "Both narratives have the themes of pedophilia, voyeurism, and tragic marriage subliminally in the narratives. The dancing maidens are virgins, hence very young girls, and the men are soldiers, probably including men of a much older age."[67] The story also resembles another yearly festival, that commemorating Jephthah's daughter; besides music and the occasion of a religious festival, both stories are tied by a silly oath and the fact that they directly affect girls, daughters who are still unmarried and under their fathers' "care."[68] Sadly, the story resembles current happenings as well. Alice Bach, for instance, reads Judges 21

66. Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 155.

67. Robert Gnuse, "Abducted Wives: A Hellenistic Narrative in Judges 21," *SJOT* 22 (2007): 238.

68. Schneider, *Judges*, 283.

with stories of ethnic genocide through rape from Rwanda and Bosnia in the latter part of the twentieth century. She speaks of a double rape:

> the sexual rape of the women of Shiloh and by extension, the economic rape of their fathers and brothers, who are by ancient standards the offended parties. There is collective violation in both acts. While an event of rape is not acknowledged openly in Judges 21, it is encoded within the ambiguity, the indirections of the text. The result is to naturalize the rape. By reading against the grain of the writers' intention to narrate the carrying off of the women as wives for the men of Benjamin as necessary and natural, one sees how the biblical authors, men who possessed both benevolence and reason, could inscribe a rationale for oppression, violation, and exploitation within the very discourse of the biblical text.[69]

In trying to understand the message of these stories, one question that keeps coming up is the degree to which we are reading contemporary gender and feminist concerns (e.g., violence against women, rape, and coercion of freedom) into the ancient texts. Happily, we are not alone in reading a critique of rape and murder in the text itself, even if they also allow a traditional, patriarchal reading.[70] Just as today there are men who care about the well-being of the women around them even if they are not gender-sensitive, one may detect in these last chapters of the book an intentional critique of inhuman and unjust practices, such as torture, rape, and sacrifice of women to the altar of male honor, including rash vows that cannot be undone despite their madness.

> The book of Judges, as some critics have noted, reflects a period when unlawfulness was rife, thus justifying the impending monarchy. . . . The rape and murder of the concubine is meant, in this sense, to indict the patriarchal system and to expose the entrenched sinfulness of the *men*. Fathers and husbands who are supposed to function as guardians

69. Alice Bach, "Rereading the Body Politic," 143–59, at 145. See also Harold Washington, "'Lest He Die in the Battle and Another Man Take Her': Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Laws of Deuteronomy 20–22," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, JSOTSup 262 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 185–213; M. I. Rey, "Reexamination of the Foreign Female Captive: Deuteronomy 21:10-14 as a Case of Genocidal Rape," *JFSR* 32 (2016): 37–53; Mitzi Smith, "Reading the Story," 15–33.

70. Furthermore, already the Talmud deals with rape and "discusses the psychological effects of rape on women," and woman's consent or resistance to sexual intercourse, even within marriage, according to Müllner, "Lethal Differences," 130–31.

> have renounced this vital role for cowardly self-preservation. The homosocial panic that results testifies to the chaotic, godless circumstance of the time.[71]

In the end, the tribes become reconciled to each other. The price, however, is high in terms of human lives of soldiers, of whole cities and regions; it is high for families, and it is especially costly on women's bodies.

### *A Religious Leader, an Anti-Model*

Does the Levitical condition of the wronged man play a role in the story? A Levite would have been seen as YHWH's agent (though a minor one after the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem). He would not have land, and perhaps that is one reason why he could not afford a more expensive but socially higher marriage. He and those attached to him would be גרים, sojourners among the other tribes and, according to the Deuteronomic injunctions, in need of special care, like the widows and orphans (Deut 14:29).[72] By the end of the book of Judges there is no deliverer, not even one so atypical as Samson; the Danites have smashed unsuspecting peoples to seize their territory in the north; and Levites are in search of the best-paying residence or sanctuary to perform their priestly duties. There is, again, the combined need for land and faithfulness to YHWH in order to affirm their identity, as the divine messenger had already announced at Bochim (Judg 2). Without these, the people turn to each other. "The dead woman's divided body is a radical symbolization of Israel's 'body politics,' the divisions in Israel."[73] It is not chance, then, that the last episodes in the book involve Levites of dubious behavior. Relationship to YHWH has become so estranged that even the priests are singled out for their corrupt behavior, as the first chapters of the book of Samuel exemplify. Improper sacrifice, greed, and disrespect for the people and for YHWH's law are some of their sins.[74]

71. Andrew Hock-Soon NG, "Revisiting Judges 19: A Gothic Perspective," *JSOT* 32 (2007): 201. Emphasis in the original.

72. Müllner, "Lethal Differences," 135, sees strangeness as a key issue in this chapter.

73. Niditch, "The 'Sodomite' Theme," 371.

74. James Kyung-Jin Lee, "The Landless Levite and the Call of Israel," *BTB* 40 (2010): 9, thinks of the Deuteronomistic theology, in which being landless and having YHWH as the only inheritance (the Levitical privilege) resonated with the—perhaps involuntary—exilic experience; he sees the Levite as someone who "stands at the precipice of humanity's utter alienation from its goodness, and the people offer him no answer except more blood. The Levite, the landless figure, is silent, unmoored by the chaos

Were the Israelites who put together this story as shocked as those who asked, "What is this evil thing?" when they got a human limb as a message? Why would Israel want to trace its origins to a society so corrupted and so far from their God that everyone did what he wanted, where the political and religious leaders were found wanting at best, where the tribes failed to carry on their dream of being brothers, and where YHWH was not heeded any longer? Carolyn Pressler thinks that "the downward spiral that characterizes Judges provided an explanation for the judgment that Israel had suffered. Apostasy, turning from God, undoes the basis of Israelite identity. . . . Israel has been warned again and again. . . . Judgment follows apostasy."[75] One may also empathize with the biblical writers' need to go back to their common origins as a way to look at their present: after all, that is what we search for in the ancient sources. The warning that there was no righteous person, especially no righteous man when it came to dealing with women, was needed to start anew.[76] Taking up Buber's suspicion on this story's historicity, Heidi Szpek sees it as "a metaphor of dire, not gentle, admonition. These allusions of Israel's past and near future history, pieced together like the *tessarae* tiles of a mosaic, present an image of what Israel's destiny *might* become, what women's position *might* become, how brethren *might* become enemies and how this *might* all be (wrongly) accomplished in the name of the Lord."[77]

That people of faith have struggled with these questions for centuries and, in the case of Judges, have chosen to tell us about those struggles through some horrific tales is one reason to engage people of faith today in addressing them through study, ritual, and action.

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he has witnessed and has helped to bring about, and must wonder that perhaps it is in this unmooring, this wandering without a place to call 'home' that he returns to God with nothing left but the hope that God might be there where he is journeying."

75. Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 257.

76. The very last words of the book read literally "In those days there was no king in Israel. A man the righteous thing in his eyes would do/will do." The order of the last sentence is uncommon; usually the verb precedes the subject. Furthermore, the verb is in the imperfect tense, indicating a continuous or unfinished action, perhaps to invite its audience to watch themselves.

77. Szpek, "The Levite's Concubine," 2.

# Closing Judges

## A Final Reflection

Israel has come full circle, from the Judah of Achsah to the Judah of the *pîlegeš*-wife. From the cries at Bochim to the cries after the massacre at Mizpah, there remain also the unheard cries of all victims, female and male, and YHWH's cry. Israel has come full circle, wounded by the increasing estrangement with YHWH.

One of the presuppositions of Judges is that there is a relationship between possession of the land taken from Canaan and worship of YHWH, whose proper name recalls the divine decision to be with the people from early times on. Proper worship involves rituals but also a particular way of dealing with each other, which may be compacted in the formula "justice and mercy." That relationship is made explicit in Joshua in terms of expectations from YHWH that the people would not go after the land's deities but would rather be faithful to YHWH. In exchange for that faithfulness, the land would be lent to them. From the first chapters of Judges it is clear, however, that this relationship will be set up in other terms than the equation faithfulness to YHWH equals annihilation of the land's nations. The peoples of the land will not be displaced to check whether Israel can maintain its faithfulness or not. And the reader needs not get to chapter 21 to realize that God's people have failed badly and live and deal with each other far worse than the nations they wanted to expel—which is, in the end, the impossible attempt to extricate oneself from one's own past and present.

> As for non-Israelites, Joshua and Judges present a field day for scholars. Non-Israelites are Canaanites and all the Other "ites" in Judges. The text creates an Us/Them relationship between Canaanites and Israelites, a cultural distinction that archaeologists find hard to affirm. Specialists in the history of religion face similar problems as Gideon slips from Baal worshiper to Yahweh worshiper, and the people of Yahweh's covenant face the people of El-Berith and of Baal-Berith in Shechem, a central sanctuary for the people of Yahweh (Joshua 8 and 24; Judges 9).[1]

Judges tells us that Israel's attempt to conquer Canaan was the attempt to found a new society, a society ruled by YHWH and by human men and women who would look after justice and peace—for their own people. It would be a new society that would treat women the way Achsah is treated, with a reasonable degree of freedom within the patriarchal system she is in, to travel, to manage her economic resources, and to enjoy the best of the land offered to the tribes. It would be a new society that would celebrate Deborah and Jael and Jephthah's daughter, a world without raped and dismembered women of lower social rank![2]

Israel failed to live up to that utopia, just as we fail to realize our own utopias.

At first sight the world of the book of Judges seems very far from many of our societies and countries today. But those of us who have experienced international or civil war, harsh economic disadvantages, or any situation in which law, order, and reason seem to have been cancelled until further notice find ourselves understanding many of the dilemmas represented in Judges. Understanding does not mean condoning their solutions, especially where women are involved. This is the first problematic aspect that remains at the end of the book.

I would like to indicate a second problematic aspect: the notion Israel had that having a king would solve their problems. Granted, that is not explicitly said. Perhaps the notice that every man did as he pleased (including individuals and tribes) should be affirmed with "and thank God!" for Saul and David and his house (whose stories are so impor-

1. Trent Butler, "Joshua–Judges and Postcolonial Criticism," in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee, Texts @ Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 31.

2. Tammi Schneider, "Achsah, the Raped *Pîlegeš*, and the Book of Judges," in *Women in the Biblical World: A Survey of Old and New Testament Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth A. McCabe and William L. Lyons (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 56–68.

tant in the next books of the Hebrew Bible) dealt with their respective daughters (and sons) and with other women in no better manner than society did at the time of the judges. "Yet Judges does not end with chaos; it ends with wholeness, reconciliation, rehabilitation, and peace, made possible in men's eyes through the taking of women," as Susan Niditch notes. This "peace" is achieved intertribally, through trafficking of women, not through a king.[3]

Even though much has changed from Judges 1 to Judges 21 (for instance, the enemy now is not Qiriath-sepher or Sisera but Benjamin), some operational principles remain, such as war as a preferred means of solving conflict, trafficking of women, negotiating between men and groups (groups of men or groups on whose behalf men make decisions). As we reach the end of the book of Judges, we realize the violence and prejudices found in Judges are by no means over; it is discouraging that humanity has not learned to deal better with each other. Unfortunate expressions still heard uttered by Christians, such as, "The God of the Old Testament is violent," are both confirmed and qualified. Yes: the God of the Old Testament is a violent God because God's followers saw God asking for—or at least allowing—violence against other peoples, just as many do see God today. Thus, the world of Judges is neither more nor less violent than our world; it is different, but at its core it deals with the same questions we deal with today. And just as today, YHWH speaks to YHWH's people insofar as the people are willing to listen. "Perhaps Yahweh's drawing out of the Israelite conflict is a reflection of his [*sic*] own prolonged inner conflict. It is said that Yahweh is 'grieved by the misery of Israel' (10.16), but could it be possible that Yahweh is turning the tables on Israel and forcing them to experience the same kind of conflicted situation which he [*sic*] is suffering?"[4] Or perhaps, as Adrien Bledstein imagines, Judges is the product of a group of women tired of men playing God, and perhaps the pained voice that tells of all these daughters (and also of many sons) is not the approving or indifferent voice that scholars often detect but the resigned voice of those who

3. Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 211.

4. Lee Roy Martin, *The Unheard Voice of God: A Pentecostal Hearing of the Book of Judges*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 32 (Dorset: Deo Publishing, 2008), 225.

recognize social and religious injustice for what it is.[5] Furthermore, since patriarchy is the system within which both the Israel of Judges and we live, even feminists are never outside it, healed from it, and free to act in totally egalitarian, nonsexist ways; this is never so clear as when gender intersects with race, class, age, education, physical fitness, nationality, and other social constraints that set people up one against another.

5. Adrien Janis Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire on Men Who Play God?," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 34–54.

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